

Aberystwyth University/Prifysgol Aberystwyth

Department of Welsh/Adran y Gymraeg

**Unnamed Women in Medieval Welsh
Literature**

Robinson, Angela M

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Table of Contents

Introduction	5
Women Shaping Destiny	9
Women of the Court	20
Distressed Ladies	34
Witches	51
Abandoned Wives	68
Conclusion	82
Bibliography	85

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Summary

Unnamed women figure prominently in many of the Medieval Welsh Prose tales, yet these women have yet to be analyzed in depth. This paper will analyze unnamed women in *The Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi* in regards to a psychoanalytical framework and some historical context. Not all unnamed women will be studied, but I have paid special attention to witches, women of the court, and noble women in need of assistance. The works analyzed include The First, The Third, and The Fourth Branches of *The Mabinogi*, *Culhwch ac Olwen*, *Chwedl Iarlles y Ffynawn*, and *Historia Peredur vab Efrawg*. I hope that through this analysis these women will be viewed not only as interesting but a vital part of these stories and that they reflect different personalities of women and culture. Indeed, although the Medieval Welsh audience was not very interested in *The Mabinogi*, perhaps the popularity of these tales today, not only among academics, says more about modern society than it does about the middle ages. Yet even so, these tales were created then and they somehow bind both those days to our own. This paper also brings this interest in unnamed women into a larger body of scholarship on unnamed or overlooked women in other literary sources, bringing Medieval Welsh literature into a larger body of world literature as well.

Introduction

The collected works of Medieval Welsh Prose have been some of my favorite stories for quite some time. I have attempted in this paper to fill a gap in character analysis and in women's studies. The major women of the *Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi*, Rhiannon, Aranrhod, Branwen, Cigfa, and Blodeu(w)edd, have attracted the attention of scholars for quite some time, yet even as recently as 30 years ago, scholars still felt that these women needed to be examined on their own merits, and not just as euhemerized goddesses or in relation to male characters.¹ Indeed, some scholars have themselves neglected to use the names of women who are named in these texts;² why neglect to use a character's name in an analysis?

The works under examination come from two major sources: *Llyfr Gwyn Rhydderch* (*The White Book of Rhydderch*, Aberystwyth, National Library of Wales, MS Peniarth 4-5) c. 1350 and *Llyfr Coch Hergest* (*The Red Book of Hergest* Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Jesus College 111) c. 1400. Collectively, they are known as *The Mabinogion* from their presentation by Lady Charlotte Guest who translated these stories into English from 1838-1849, but this term has been altered recently. Generally, the tales break down into three broad categories: *The Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi* (*The Four Branches of the Mabinogi*) sometimes referred to as *The Mabinogi* since each of the four tales ends with the same colon, "and so ends this branch of the Mabinogi"; the Welsh Arthurian Romances, *Chwedl Gereint vab Erbin*, *Chwedl Owein* or *Chwedl Iarlles y Ffynawn*, and *Historia Peredur vab Efwarg*, because of their resemblance to Chretien de Troyes's

¹ Roberta Valente, "Merched y Mabinogi": *Women and the Thematic Structure of The Four Branches*," (PhD diss., Cornell University, 1986), 1.

² Patrick K. Ford, 14-15. Even though Ford has not mentioned Cilydd as Culhwch's father, he uses the term "mother" and the pronoun "she" instead of her name, Goleuddydd daughter of Anlawdd Wledig.

romances, *Erec et Enide*, *Yvain*, and *Perceval*; and finally the Native Tales which include *Culhwch ac Olwen*, considered the earliest of the prose tales, *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy*, *Breuddwyd Macsen Wledig*, and *Lludd ac Llefelys*.³

Previous scholars examined the works under consideration in light of the cohesiveness of the narrative, thematic ideas, the folklore aspects and motifs in the works, and comparisons of the Welsh Arthurian Romances to Chretien's. From a cohesive perspective, several scholars have discussed the lack of resolution in the various stories and early scholars like W J. Gruffydd tried to recreate "proto-tales" from *The Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi* especially in regards to an early Celtic mythos. This scholarly dissatisfaction with the narratives applied to nearly all of the tales, even though "the legend demands answers—but not necessarily resolutions—to the most mysterious, critical, and least answerable questions of life."⁴ The main issue is that Medieval Welsh prose, like Athena, sprang fully formed in the fourteenth century in these manuscripts and others. Many of these tales have few previous versions available in other texts and since there is little other earlier Welsh literature in Welsh, the hints of literary interests that these tales bring leave many scholars wanting more. The questions of linguistics, too, both help and hinder scholars in dating these texts; without more examples, much of the lingual shifts in Medieval Welsh have to be inferred, rather than shown.

In some cases, this paper will seem quite facile; the emphasis is on characters who spend so little time on the page. In its own way, this paper is reading into characters who

³ *The Mabinogion*, translated by Sioned Davies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), Davies breaks this last group into two smaller ones, based on Arthurian context, *Culhwch ac Olwen* and *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy*, and two pseudo historical, *Breuddwyd Macsen Wledig* and *Lludd ac Llefelys*, xi-xii. For the rest of the paper, I will be using Davies' translation.

⁴ Linda Degh, *Legend and Belief: Dialectics of a Folklore Genre* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 3.

have never really been analyzed in depth, or who have, but in conjunction with male characters. There are some passages where the analysis has emphasized the relationship between the male and female characters, but always with an eye to keeping the female characters as central to the discussion. Also, I have chosen to view these characters “as is,” utilizing a reader-response method and psychoanalytical framework. On occasion, and especially when I am discussing scholarly works, the analytical framework will include a historical perspective, but only as a way to ground the stories in the twelfth century and later, their probable composition time frame.

Whenever we examine works in another language, and especially from a time when spelling was not standardized, differences in spelling and terms will appear not only in the original texts, but also in translations. I have chosen not to use the term “Mabinogion” but to refer to each tale separately, *Historia Peredur vab Efrog* for example, while I chose to call the four tales about Pwyll, Branwen, Manawydan, and Math, collectively as *The Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi* and separately as *The First Branch*, *The Second Branch*, *The Third Branch*, and *The Fourth Branch*.

I have chosen only a few of the possible unnamed women for this paper, focusing on *The First Branch*, *The Fourth Branch*, *Culhwch ac Olwen*, *Historia Peredur vab Efrog*, and *Chwedl Iarlles y Ffynawn*. I have, when appropriate, referenced passages from *The Third Branch* and *Chwedl Gereint vab Erbin* in order to show a pattern of perspective towards these characters and their functions within the stories. These women were important enough to be included and I would like to explore why and what they tell us about Medieval Welsh Literature that is different from other medieval literatures.

My hope is that this work will serve as a way to analyze women in Medieval Welsh Literature more fully and from multiple analytical frameworks. Furthermore, I hope that specific categories of women, such as working women, servants, and “invisible” women (those women whom we know exist but don’t seem to be mentioned in the text, for example the wives of Pwyll’s men or the wives of the craftsmen who plot against Manawydan and Pryderi), as well as the general category of women will be explored in more detail in future works. These stories, especially the warrior centered stories connected to Arthur, highlight multiple attributes that these characters possessed. Moreover, the brevity of many of these passages allows for multiple interpretations of characters who don’t even speak. The combination of speech and silence emphasizes the choices of the author(s) of these stories, the real life behaviors of people, and the reflection of these works on Welsh culture, both in the middle ages and modern.

Women Shaping Destiny

In medieval Welsh literature, women are not often depicted as fighting or bearing weapons to defend themselves, their friends or family, or their dependents. Instead, many of these women use words to influence the men in their world.⁵ Many of these women use speech in a way that is similar to prophecy, since they often either pronounce a future that they want to have happen or they provide important assistance to men in order to change the political status quo. Some historians have examined real queens to discuss their ability to exercise power, searching for instances of private and public power wielded by queens and the ways that they influenced their royal husbands.⁶ In two cases in *Culhwch ac Olwen*, these women work to better the social standing of their children. They work within the current political system in order to change it, often simply through words and the men who have the overt power. Other women use their actions to further the political agenda of their husbands, thereby protecting their children and their children's future. The example from *Historia Peredur vab Efwraig* shows a different response: isolation. These women all respond to the world shaped by a warrior culture, a world where they have little power to change things directly.

One of the Welsh tales with these unnamed women is *Culhwch ac Olwen*. *Culhwch ac Olwen* relates the story of a young man, Culhwch, who sets out to win Olwen's hand in marriage. Knights from Arthur's court assist him at several points because Arthur promised to aid Culhwch in this endeavor. In order to win Olwen,

⁵ Kenneth Hodges, "Swords and Sorceresses: The Chivalry of Malory's Nyneve" *Arthuriana* 12 no. 2 (2002): 81.

⁶ Heather J. Tanner, "Queenship: Office, Custom, or Ad Hoc? The Case of Queen Matilda III of England (1135-1152)" in *Eleanor of Aquitaine: Lord and Lady* edited by Bonnie Wheeler and John Cami Parsons, 133-158 (New York; Palgrave Macmillan, 2003) and Patricia-Ann Lee, "Reflections of Power: Margaret of Anjou and the Dark Side of Queenship," *Renaissance Quarterly* 39 no.2: 183-217 are just two of the scholars who have explored queens and their ability to influence policy directly and the men who make policy.

Culhwch must first locate her, for she lives far from Arthur's court and no one there has heard of her. Furthermore, once Culhwch finds Olwen, he must ask permission from her father, Ysbaddaden Bencawr (Chief Giant). Ysbaddaden counters Culhwch's request with a long list of quests that Culhwch must first accomplish in order to win Olwen's hand. Several episodes comprise this story and in the end, Culhwch wins Olwen's hand without completing all of Ysbaddaden's tasks. This tale has received much attention from scholars for several reasons, including the long list of names in Arthur's court, the tasks and the fact that many of them are not completed, and the comparison of *Culhwch ac Olwen* to the other tales in regards to language, theme, and structure.⁷

However, two female characters in this story provide, at key points, assistance to our hero and provide important plot points, Culhwch's stepmother and his aunt, Custennin's wife. There are also shadowy women important to the story, Culhwch's stepsister and the women in Arthur's court. While Culhwch's stepmother and stepsister seem tangential to most of the story, and indeed so does Custennin's wife, as we will see in the following analysis, tangential female characters both support the gender-related roles of our male heroes and cross those very gender lines by supplying our male protagonists with information, support, and solutions to their problems by working within the system to encourage men to change the political status quo.

In Culhwch's case, his stepmother provides the impetus for his quest and pursuit of Olwen. His stepmother is aware of her stepson's possible futures and tries to secure

⁷ Proinsias MacCana, *The Mabinogi* (Cardiff: The University of Wales Press, 1992), 60, and Ford, 119, Kenneth Hurlstone Jackson, *The International Popular Tale and Early Welsh Tradition* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1961), 79, although Jackson is dealing with motifs rather than themes per se. For specific themes, Catherine Piquemal, "Culhwch and Olwen": A Structured Portrayal of Arthur?," *Arthuriana* 10 no. 3 Welsh Arthurian Literature (2000): 7-26, and Sarah Sheehan, "Giants, Boar-hunts and Barbering: Masculinity in "Culhwch and Olwen"," *Arthuriana* 15 no. 3 (2005): 3-25.

her daughter's future through Culhwch. When Culhwch rejects the idea of marriage to his stepsister, he is also rejecting a secure place for his stepsister in his father's court. The precarious position that his stepsister holds at court is exacerbated by her lack of connection, both personal and familial, to Culhwch and his father. Although an old crone has reassured Culhwch's stepmother that her husband will have children by her, as a mother, she immediately seeks to assure her daughter of a place at the same court where she now reigns. Rather than allow her daughter to be moved away through marriage, she takes advantage of the opportunity that her husband's son presents.

In fact, her daughter, although simply described as "fair enough for any nobleman," is actually the linchpin for the whole rest of the story. By rejecting his stepsister, Culhwch incurs the disapproval or wrath of his stepmother who then sets him on a dangerous and difficult path. No one in King Arthur's court has heard of Ysbaddaden, making Culhwch's chance of success quite small. Furthermore, his stepmother's *geas* assures her own children, including perhaps, her daughter, the chance of inheriting the throne.⁸ As a result, Culhwch will never beget children unless he finds Olwen, daughter of Ysbaddaden. While it is Culhwch's choice to reject or accept his stepsister, without her, his quest for Olwen takes on new meaning. Instead of needing Olwen as a wife, Culhwch also needs to become the ruler of her land and replace her father in order to gain a kingdom of his own. Prior to his stepmother's *geas*, Culhwch's right to rule was unchallenged, if barely acknowledged since he had been absent from

⁸ It is possible that Culhwch's stepsister will inherit the throne, since other tales highlight the death of male characters and the resulting attachment of the land to a woman, although in *Historia Peredur vab Efwarg* and *Chwedl Iarlles y Ffynawn*, the woman is usually the dead man's wife. The Welsh however didn't usually pass land onto their daughters since they practiced a male dominated inheritance which included four generations. For storytelling purposes it is possible that Culhwch's stepsister might have inherited but that would make this story a bit more like the Arthurian Romances.

court. That might have changed in the future if he had been faced with a stepbrother to contend with him, but he would probably have been trained at court with his father and his father's men and been accepted as the rightful ruler upon his father's death.

After Culhwch's quest begins, he meets his aunt, the wife of Custennin. Custennin's wife is also concerned with her child's future, since Ysbaddaden has killed all but one of her sons. Custennin's wife not only aids Culhwch by sheltering him, she also uses her personal relationship with and knowledge of Olwen to assist Culhwch in his quest. She clearly shows a type of "private" or feminine power and influence.⁹ Indeed, by connecting Culhwch and Olwen in an informal situation, Custennin's wife subverts the male dominated customs and allows Culhwch to achieve his goal more quickly.

Culhwch's aunt also manages to avoid Ysbaddaden until after Culhwch and Olwen have met and grown interested in each other. In this way, Custennin's wife emphasizes her personal relationships in order to change people's lives. She also connects to Olwen as a woman and the two share a cleansing ritual, washing hair, in order to bond them more tightly.¹⁰ In addition, Custennin's wife also secures a place for her son, either with one of Arthur's knights or with Culhwch, if he is successful in his quest. Custennin's wife could probably have sent her son to King Arthur, just as Culhwch's father sent him. Even if Custennin's wife did not have the same rank as her sister, her son could still have been fostered at King Arthur's court. Yet it is difficult to imagine the pain of a mother at having to send away her last child to a faraway land, even if it is Arthur's court, and Custennin and his wife probably felt that it was safer to keep their son at home and to shelter him themselves.

⁹ Lee, 185 and Anne J. Duggan "Introduction" in *Queens and Queenship in Medieval Europe: Proceedings of a Conference Held at King's College London April 1995* (Rochester NY: Boydell Press, 1997), xxi.

¹⁰ This seems particularly appropriate since Arthur cuts Culhwch's hair, Davies, 183.

There is an interesting parallel here with Peredur's mother. Custennin is a shepherd in another man's country, but Efracw was the ruler of an earldom. After his death and the deaths of six of his sons, his wife moves her remaining child, Peredur, from the court to the wilderness to safeguard him and his inheritance because she "was a wise and clever woman" who "thought hard about her son and his territory, and decided to flee with the boy to the wasteland and wilderness, leaving behind the inhabited regions."¹¹ In addition, Peredur's mother only brings "women and children, and meek, mild men who could not and would not fight or wage war."¹² Peredur's mother replaces the male dominated "knightly" system with a quiet and peaceful one and to protect her child she removes all traces of a warrior culture in her home and removes Peredur from it, including any men who would likely challenge the way she was not only raising her son, but also the way she was running the household. In this way, Peredur's mother's domain in the wilderness resembles Aranrhod's and her lack of warriors indicates that she is choosing to live outside the realm of the warrior culture exemplified by Arthur's court and his knights. Rather than try to change or subvert the political structure, Peredur's mother moves outside of it. Her actions are completely believable given the fact that her husband and her six other sons were killed because they "follow[ed] battle."¹³

These women understand the male dominated warrior culture in which they are embedded. While Culhwch's stepsister is the inadvertent impetus for Culhwch's quest, Culhwch's stepmother and his aunt, Custennin's wife, both use their accepted roles as wives and mothers to exercise their own subversive power. This example is also seen in Branwen's story where she uses her voice and her patience to train a bird to carry her

¹¹ Ibid., 65.

¹² Ibid., 65.

¹³ Ibid., 65.

message to Bendigeidfran, subverting Matholwch's attempts to isolate her and prevent her from sending any messages home to her brothers. In all these examples, women use their wits and intelligence to shape the lives of the men around them, even while appearing as powerless characters. Just as Fiona Winward notes for the women in the *Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi*, these women work within the established hierarchy, but use their intelligence "to instigate events and sometimes control their own fate."¹⁴ Indeed, Culhwch's whole quest is begun because of his stepmother and stepsister and his quest would likely have failed without the assistance of both Custennin's wife and Olwen. The brave knights of Arthur's court must complete the assignments which Culhwch bravely accepts, but without the women to push the plot and the narrative, the story comes to a screeching halt. Peredur's mother uses isolation to alter her son's future, yet is thwarted by the very political realm which she has separated herself from. She cannot continue in this world, and dies of a broken heart once Peredur leaves her for that other world.

In fact, one of the key aspects of these women is that they speak their minds. Roberta Valente has highlighted the importance of both speech and silence in her work, *Merched y Mabinogi*. The importance of speech for the female characters is quite strong, often showcasing their intelligence, like Rhiannon, their ability to persuade, like the Morwyn y Gaer, and their charm, like the Empress of Constantinople. Women in *The Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi* often speak their minds in an emotional scene,¹⁵ as Valente says and these scenes can highlight the social successes and failures of these women.

In a similar vein, Rhiannon approaches Pwyll in order to change her marriage prospects and once he inadvertently gives her to Gwawl, she convinces Pwyll to follow

¹⁴ Fiona Winward, "The Women in the Four Branches," *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies* 34 (1997), 80.

¹⁵ Valente, 107.

her advice to thwart Gwawl and reunite the two of them. Like Rhiannon, Custennin's wife and Culhwch's stepmother speak their minds in order to achieve their political ends for their children. The removal of Culhwch allows his stepmother's children a path to the leadership just as the removal of Ysbaddaden secures a place for his aunt's son, Gorau. Once Peredur's mother must send him away, she does so after giving him some advice, quoted at length in the chapter *Distressed Ladies*.¹⁶ Her last act with her son is to tell him how to behave, binding his actions to her words. Since these women cannot use force within this system, they use their words to shift their reality. Like some of the women in Irish legends, the words spoken by Custennin's wife, Peredur's mother and Culhwch's stepmother are a bond and a spell, not only indicating what they would like to have happen, but what does happen.¹⁷ In this way, they are both prophetic, acting as wise women, and shaping the destinies, perhaps in small ways, of powerful men.¹⁸

Women also act in concert with the established order in order to ensure their children's futures. In *The Third Branch of the Mabinogi*, one quite active wife is also very silent. In fact, her presence is merely related to Manawydan by her husband, Llwyd son of Cil Coed, who sought revenge against Pryderi because of his father's actions against Gwawl son of Clud. This woman appears as a mouse, intent on the theft of Manawydan's grain and his sustenance. Manawydan captures this mouse and begins to build a small gallows for it. Three times a man approaches him, in different guises, urging Manawydan not to kill the mouse for it is beneath a man like him, then offering Manawydan monetary compensation and then finally, in his third disguise as a bishop,

¹⁶ 40, below.

¹⁷ Valente, 73.

¹⁸ This is also true of the witches of Caer Loyw and the Black Oppressor, all of whom say, "it was foretold that," indicating the power of words in medieval Welsh prose.

offering Manawydan more money, twenty-four pounds and seven horses with their baggage. Manawydan refuses. Finally, Manawydan agrees to release the mouse on the condition that the man returns Pryderi and Rhiannon, vows to undo the enchantment on the cantrefs of Dyfed, and then explain who the mouse was. The mouse was actually the man's wife, pregnant, who insisted on accompanying her husband's retainers in their theft on the third night, along with the ladies of the court. The only reason Manawydan caught her was because her pregnancy slowed her down. Indeed, Manawydan has backed Llwyd into a corner, since now that Llwyd has admitted how important the mouse is to him, Manawydan further compels him to ensure that Dyfed will be spell-free and that no one will ever take revenge on Pryderi, Rhiannon, or Manawydan.

After Manawydan sees Pryderi and Rhiannon approaching, he releases the mouse and Llwyd transforms his wife back to her human self, "the fairest young woman that anyone had seen."¹⁹ Even though the story shows the woman's transformation back to her old self, she never offers thanks for sparing her life or embraces her husband. Her silence in this situation stands in contrast to the speeches that both Rhiannon and Cigfa spoke in this story as well as the opportunities that Peredur's mother, Culhwch's stepmother, and aunt take. Indeed, Llwyd's wife has no need for speech since she was the captive that Manawydan needed to end the problems he and his friends were having. The wife, for her part, was quite bold. Even though she was pregnant, she insisted on a transformation into a mouse and in taking part in the daring raid along with the ladies of her court. Her husband was not able to dissuade her. From one perspective, she was quite brave, yet from another, quite foolhardy. She risked not only her life, but possibly the heir to her husband's kingdom. Had Manawydan been more cruel, she could have paid for her

¹⁹ Davies, 46.

adventure with her life and lost the heir to her husband's kingdom. Moreover, her actions were not solely for her husband's benefit. He did not gain new lands through his enchantment on Pryderi and Rhiannon, although he did debase them in his court. Llwyd's motivation was revenge for his friend, showing how bonds of loyalty could carry men to extreme action. Yet Llwyd's wife's actions were even more extreme, for she risked everything in order to assist her husband in his revenge. Her actions show her devotion and loyalty to her husband, while her silence highlights that sometimes women have to choose between words and actions.²⁰

The wife's silence speaks volumes. Like Culhwch's stepmother and his aunt, she participated in decisions made regarding political life. From her perspective, she may well have been acting to secure her own child's future, since Pryderi, if released, could have enacted a similar revenge against her own child in the future. Indeed, her love for her husband likely spurred her on, although his revenge was for a friend, a man he held dear. Unlike the women from *Historia Peredur vab Efrog* and *Culhwch ac Olwen*, this woman works not to subvert the status quo, but to reinforce it and the path that her husband has taken. Instead of influencing her husband through words, she shows her acceptance and loyalty to his dangerous plan through her actions and participation. Her capture is unfortunate, yet important for it not only allows a resolution to the story, but also a connection to *The First Branch*, reminding the audience that decisions have long-term implications and that ties of friendship and loyalty can be just as strong as those of blood. While Llwyd's wife is quite different from Peredur's mother, Culhwch's

²⁰ I disagree with Winward's depiction of Llwyd's wife as chattel; I'm not sure any man would want to have his wife "handled" if she were pregnant, 91.

stepmother and aunt, she participates in the political world to effect, or in her case, reinforce her leader's decisions.

These women also shape the lives of the many people who live, and are often unremarked upon, in the various lands. Certainly, other people may have experienced the loss of children at Ysbaddaden's hands, just as Custennin and his wife did. Furthermore, Olwen's visits to Custennin's house and her convenient payments suggest that she is aware of her father's untoward behavior. In some of the Welsh Arthurian Romances, like *Chwedl Geraint vab Erbin* and *Chwedl Iarlles y Ffynawn*, the people of the court and the countryside are shown as sharing in the troubles and travails of their rulers. Indeed, Peredur never reclaims his father's earldom, so his mother has not only removed him, she has permanently altered the lives of her husband's people.²¹ The people of the court, and often the maidens waiting upon a distressed lady, are prey to the depredations of more powerful men who steal land from these unprotected women. This situation causes difficulties for everyone, as food becomes scarce and the people within the castle are often forced to defend against more powerful and numerous foes. Indeed, Pwyll is considered a good lord because he takes his people's concerns into account. He responds to the wishes of his court when they prevail upon him to set aside Rhiannon, yet counters with a reasonable request of his own. In replacing Ysbaddaden with a knight worthy of Arthur's court, namely Gorau, Culhwch aids the whole kingdom and gains a wife for himself in the process. Also, without Culhwch to perhaps dispute the succession and provoke civil war, Cilydd's kingdom is allowed to continue with the hope of a new child between Cilydd and his second wife. Indeed, since Culhwch's mother experienced a bout

²¹ Davies, 68, 73. The dwarfs in Arthur's court originally lived in his father's court. They had to seek shelter in Arthur's court because they were not included in Peredur's mother's house in the wilderness.

of madness, there is a chance that her child might also show some signs of madness or illness as well, leaving Cilydd's second wife the opportunity to produce a child without this possibility.²² Both Custennin's wife and Culhwch's stepmother place a high value on their children and work hard to improve their standing in society. Peredur's mother isolates him from the same thing that killed her husband and her other sons, trying to keep him alive. The options open to these women are to use their words, their supportive actions, and their understanding of human nature and relationships to better the lives of their children.

²² Cilydd's second wife meets a hag who tells her, "It is prophesied that [Cilydd] shall have an heir; he may have one by *you*, since he hasn't had one by anyone else." Ibid., 180. The hag has disqualified Culhwch as Cilydd's heir, but not any future children from Cilydd's second wife.

Women of the court

While some women alter the political climate through men or completely reject it, other women are important as reflections of major female characters. Many women serve in various capacities to the main characters, most notably as: serving women, wet nurses, and ladies in waiting. These women lack names because they are generally unimportant to the story, yet in their own ways, each group either moves the plot or provides character development for other female characters. This section focuses on the women who wait upon the leading ladies of the Welsh tales. These women often act as a group but they also highlight the human responses to women who are, in MacCana's opinion, "strong and assertive characters that lend themselves to dramatic treatment."²³ Furthermore, "this formidable trio of women [Rhiannon, Aranrhod, and Blodeuedd] owes its dramatic impact more to the resonance of tradition than to the pen of the author."²⁴ Yet the dramatic impact of these women is also heightened by their comparison to their serving women, not just in comparison to their male counterparts. Indeed, each of the three, Rhiannon, Aranrhod, and Blodeuedd, are made more real because their relationships to other women are portrayed realistically.

In Pwyll's court, Rhiannon gives birth to her son and then entrusts his care to six nurses while she rests from giving birth. During the night, a claw steals the child. The nurses wake to find the child missing and discuss the best plan of action. Rhiannon's women are responsible for concocting the story that Rhiannon killed her own child and then planting evidence. These women act out of fear, even after Rhiannon reassures them that they do not need to fear any repercussions for the loss of her child under their

²³ MacCana, 55.

²⁴ Ibid., 57.

supervision. The women's actions highlight two essential factors for the story: Rhiannon's character and an important plot point. Pryderi needs to be gone for a few years in order provide a good reason for his name. The women, too, act out of fear which highlights the alienness of Rhiannon. These women are likely the wives of Pwyll's noblemen and retainers or their daughters. Their relationship to Rhiannon is dependent on their relationship to the other men in Pwyll's court and, to a certain extent, they are an extension of Pwyll's men. These women also function to coax out Rhiannon's character. While Rhiannon's magical nature has already been emphasized in the way that she approached Pwyll, the alienation between Rhiannon and her own women exacerbates the gap between Rhiannon and other women, women who are supposed to be 'hers.' Instead, the women rely upon the idea that the testimony of the six of them will outweigh hers. Clearly, these women are not 'hers,' nor is Rhiannon merely a mortal woman in the minds of the other women. In addition, the women say, "We are nothing but bruises and blows from struggling with you; and we are certain that we have never seen a woman fight like you did, and it was useless for us to struggle with you."²⁵ As Fiona Winward noted, physical strength was considered "unwomanly,"²⁶ and as such, the women watching Rhiannon's son use this charge against her; in declaring Rhiannon strong enough to beat all six of them in order to destroy her child and not remember it, the women designate her as not one of them and not really a "woman." Again, the women utilize acceptable means of society to prove their case against Rhiannon and save themselves from being burned alive or killed.

²⁵ Davies, 16-17.

²⁶ Winward, 84. Furthermore, Jackson concludes that Rhiannon was likely charged with eating her child because of several other international folklore motifs and the "smearing of the blood on her face," 88, making her even less human.

Even though she is in a position of authority, and the wife of Pwyll, a much-respected leader, Rhiannon's women do not seek to help her and they do not support her once Rhiannon's sentence is pronounced. Indeed, Pwyll's reputation might actually count against Rhiannon in this case, for how could the women adequately explain the loss of his child because a claw reached through a window and snatched the baby? The women are at fault because they neglected their duty by falling asleep and realize their responsibility for such a terrible oversight. Furthermore, the child has disappeared completely, making his disappearance seem magical or supernatural. In addition, the women likely knew that Pwyll's nobles were expecting Pwyll to produce an heir by Rhiannon or else marry someone else. Since Rhiannon gave birth to a son within the year time period, the noblemen's request had been answered and the women were now responsible for the loss of an heir in the eyes of Pwyll, their lord, Rhiannon, their lady, and Pwyll's noblemen, probably their husbands and family members. The good will of Pwyll's noblemen actually makes the loss of his son even more poignant and more dangerous for Rhiannon's women.

Furthermore, the very nature of the kidnapping provides additional support for Rhiannon's magical or supernatural nature. A claw snatching a newborn child is difficult to explain, stretches credulity, and is also a supernatural occurrence, although the women did not witness the incident. Still, the child disappeared silently from a royal chamber in Arbeth after midnight. What other explanation could there be besides a supernatural one? In this case, Rhiannon's women fear the very supernatural beings who probably arranged or perpetrated the kidnapping.²⁷ Pwyll and Rhiannon have already had supernatural

²⁷ Juliette Woods, "The Calumniated Wife in Medieval Welsh Literature," *The Mabinogi: A Book of Essays*, 72, also sees this as a possibility in light of the revenge plot in *The Third Branch*.

experiences and faced supernatural enemies, so the kidnapping of their son naturally falls into a category that, as humans, Rhiannon's women cannot face and easily survive. The wrath of whatever magical beings are responsible for Rhiannon's child's kidnapping may take years to truly materialize, as the experiences of Pryderi and Rhiannon show in the *Third Branch*. While Rhiannon's women's reactions are easy to understand, the supernatural threat never materializes, most likely because Teyrnon kills the claw and rescues the child.²⁸ Although the women's fear is relatable for the audience, once the immediate threat passes, Rhiannon's women keep silent because of their guilt and fear. Furthermore, Woods highlights the aspect of a foreign wife in the Calumniated Wife motif. Rhiannon not only fits the concept of the "fairy mistress," she is also subject to prejudice because she is from a foreign land.²⁹ Although foreigners had legal rights under Welsh law, "the position of the foreign wife" is "an acknowledged but unnatural element in the social system."³⁰ Rhiannon faithfully abides by the punishment laid upon her, adding to her character as a good woman and a good wife of their leader. Her behavior also indicates her obedience to the decisions of her lord and the wishes of her people, while her innocence effects the audience. The women who watch over Rhiannon's son provide an opportunity for the author(s) to highlight certain aspects of Rhiannon, Pwyll, and their marriage.

Teyrnon's wife also has women who reflect her personality and her relationship to her people. Once Teyrnon has rescued Rhiannon's child, Teyrnon's wife tells him that she will take her women into her confidence and that they will say that she has given

²⁸ Brynley Roberts, "'Peredur Son of Efwarg': A Text in Transition," *Arthuriana* 10 no. 3 Welsh Arthurian Literature (2000), 70. For Jackson, "the claw is a very striking dramatic theme" even though it is vestigial compared to its original story, 94-95.

²⁹ Woods, "The Calumniated Wife," 71.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 69, 75.

birth to the boy herself. Unlike Rhiannon's women, these women do not have any dialogue indicating their assent to this plan. While the author(s) shortens this passage in order to stay close to his plot, the effect is that Teyrnon's wife is more reliable in relation to her women and to her husband. Even though she has no real cover for the sudden appearance of a child, Teyrnon's wife is not concerned about her women betraying her. Her confidence in them also reflects a strong bond with them and her own strong personality. Teyrnon's wife appears quite confident and intelligent in her speech and in her actions towards her women. Unlike Rhiannon, her women likely view her as one of them, emphasizing her practical attitude towards life, even when something extraordinary happens.

The women in *The Fourth Branch of the Mabinogi* also show an important aspect of the court. *The Fourth Branch* relates the story of Gwydion and his brother, Gilfaethwy, and the second half changes focus to Gwydion and his nephew, Lleu Llaw Gyffes. In the first part, Gwydion learns that his brother, Gilfaethwy, is in love with the foot maiden of their uncle, Math son of Mathonwy. In order to bring Gilfaethwy his heart's desire, Gwydion manufactures a war between Math and Pryderi, creating an opportunity for Gilfaethwy to sleep with Goewin. In the passage that covers the rape, "and in the bed of Math son of Mathonwy, Gilfaethwy and Goewin daughter of Pebin were put to sleep together, and her maidens were forced out violently, and she was taken against her will that night."³¹ Here the maidens surrounding Goewin are forced out, obviously against both Goewin's will and theirs. The women act as poor protection for Goewin's chastity, but resisting Math's nephews would be difficult in most circumstances. Goewin later accuses Gwydion and Gilfaethwy in clear terms and says, "there was none in the court

³¹ Davies, 50.

did not know of it.”³² Instead of relying only upon the word of her maidens, Goewin uses the whole court as witnesses which emphasizes how thoroughly she “did [not] bear it in quiet.”³³

In this instance, Goewin’s women are not enough to guarantee the devastating nature of Gwydion’s and Gilfaethwy’s crime. In order to stand against Math’s own nephews, and a powerful magician like Gwydion, Goewin needs not only the word of her own women, who may be considered unreliable and partial, but also the court as a whole. Goewin’s women would have been part servants and part protectors, yet they were probably, as Gwenhwyfar’s women are, accompanying her and sewing.³⁴ This seems complimentary to the women of Aranrhod and Blodeuedd in later sections of the story.

Once Gwydion and Gilfaethwy pay for their crimes against Goewin, Math then asks Gwydion for recommendations on a new foot maiden and Gwydion recommends his sister, Aranrhod. Math applies a virginity test to Aranrhod, who fails by dropping a child and a small something and then flees. The second child, who is placed in a small chest by Gwydion, is bereft of a name and a mother. Gwydion engages Aranrhod three times in order to win the boy a name, weapons, and a wife. In order to gain a name for the boy, Gwydion takes him to Aranrhod’s castle, named *Caer Aranrhod*. Her castle is empty of many characters, save for the few maidens who accompany her and the “they” who act as unnamed and unidentified agents between Aranrhod and Gwydion.

Gwydion’s first encounter goes poorly with Aranrhod and she swears a *geas* upon the boy that he will not have a name until she herself names him. Gwydion brings the boy

³² Ibid., 52.

³³ Ibid., 52.

³⁴ Ibid., 141, Gwenhwyfar would take as many women with her as can find mounts for in *Chwedl Geraint vab Erbin*, 116, and “Gwenhwyfar and her handmaidens sewing at a window,” in *Chwedl Iarlles y Ffynawn*.

with him, in disguise, and crafts shoes outside Caer Aranrhod to attract Aranrhod's attention. She eventually visits Gwydion and accidentally names the boy Lleu Llaw Gyffes, which prompts her to then pronounce another geas upon Lleu, namely that he will not receive arms unless from her. A disguised Gwydion again plays a trick on Aranrhod, making her and her court believe that a fleet is about to attack Caer Aranrhod. In this section, Aranrhod's maidens perform important functions. Although not explicitly mentioned in the first episode, it is likely that a maiden accompanied Aranrhod when she visited the disguised Gwydion as a shoemaker. In the second episode, Aranrhod enters Gwydion and Lleu's chamber with a maiden to inform them that a fleet is poised to attack. Gwydion suggests that she provide arms for himself and Lleu,

“and lo, she came, and two maidens with her, and arms for two men with them. ‘Lady,’ said he, ‘arm thou this youth, and I with the maidens will arm myself.’”³⁵

At this point, Aranrhod's maidens provide an important function that occurs often in the Welsh Arthurian Romances, the arming and disarming of fighting men.³⁶ Aranrhod's maidens are well-versed in this facet of courtly life, even though there are apparently not many fighting men in Caer Aranrhod. Aranrhod reproaches Gwydion after he reveals the attack to be mere subterfuge and says that “many a lad might have lost his life...”³⁷ due to Gwydion's false attack. The implication of these words is clear: Aranrhod does not keep many fighting men, for she refers to them as lads, and yet her women are quite competent at arming men. This sets Aranrhod apart from Math, who is able to call upon a huge muster of men to fight Pryderi, and even though Aranrhod has a much smaller area to

³⁵ Ibid., 57.

³⁶ Ibid. In impoverished areas, it is sometimes the maiden who disarms the knight and takes care of his horse, 141 when Enid grooms Geraint's horse, or just a custom when the twenty four maidens groom Cynon's horse, set the table for him, and help him to undress, 117.

³⁷ Ibid., 57.

govern than Math, she is still concerned with the lads in her “cantref” and has prepared her maidens in the ways of courtly life which often includes armed men visiting.

The arming of men ties Aranrhod’s castle to some of the impoverished noblemen in the Welsh Arthurian Romances whose lovely daughters act as grooms for the knights and also help them disarm. In the Welsh Arthurian Romances, women usually perform this function when men are unavailable. This adds to the odd nature of Aranrhod’s court. Although she is not impoverished, Aranrhod has separated herself from the main court and as a result, separated herself from much of society. At the same time, however, she has taught her women how to treat guests, fighting men and bards, even though they are not supplied with many of either in her own domain. In this way, although they do not usually arm men, the maidens of Aranrhod are competent to serve in Math’s court and Aranrhod has maidens who reflect her own knowledge of normal court life. This is also apparent when Gwydion and Lleu first appear as bards, for Aranrhod’s court is prepared to receive them “with great joy” and the preparations for dining and the chamber is readied with no negative comments from either the narrator or from Gwydion. Gwydion could easily make a negative remark about Aranrhod to Lleu, or vice versa, and even more so about her poor hospitality in order to emphasize the remoteness of her caer. Yet neither the characters nor the narrator make these comments, instead aligning Aranrhod’s court with so many of the other courts in the collected works of *The Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi* and the Welsh Arthurian Romances. From one perspective, the running of Aranrhod’s court is unremarkable for it does not effect the overall story and action, yet the fact that it is described in a clear and similar way to other courts aligns the way that she runs her court with others.

The maidens in Aranrhod's court therefore are almost interchangeable with the maidens at any other court, especially in regards to their loyalty and obedience to their lady. After Lleu receives a wife and court, however, the loyalty of Blodeuedd's women brings them trouble. Aranrhod places a third geas on Lleu in which she says that he will not be able to marry a woman from the people alive today. Gwydion and Math then create a woman for Lleu out of flowers and after Lleu and Blodeuedd are married, Lleu receives land, Cantref Dinoding, from Math. One day, when Lleu is visiting Math at Caer Dathyl, Blodeuedd sees a man, Gronw Bebyr, hunting, and asks the court if she should extend her hospitality to him. They fall in love and betray Lleu, nearly killing him. Gwydion then finds Lleu in the form of an eagle, returns him to human form, and the two seek Math's permission to enact revenge upon Gronw and Blodeuedd. Blodeuedd and her women flee the castle with Gwydion following.

“When Blodeuedd heard they [Math's army with Gwydion at the front] were coming, she took her maidens with her and made for the mountain...And they were so afraid that they could only travel with their faces looking backwards. And they knew nothing until they fell into the lake and were drowned, all except Blodeuedd.”³⁸

The women drown in the lake because they are too involved with looking behind them, not because Gwydion actually punishes them. Placing the blame on the women and their fear displaces responsibility for their deaths from Gwydion to the women and emphasizes their poor choices, too. Yet the women are fleeing because they are Blodeuedd's women, and their loyalty to her makes them guilty of the same betrayal as Blodeuedd. At this point, a brief comparison to a passage in *The Odyssey* will shed additional light on the situation that Blodeuedd and her women face. This episode highlights what happens once

³⁸Ibid., 63.

Odysseus has returned to his own court and is ready to seek vengeance upon the suitors in his house.

Odysseus has been absent from his home in Ithaca for ten years. In his absence, Penelope has acted as a good host by providing food and entertainment to her suitors. As a good wife, Penelope has refused the advances of her suitors, even using deception to stave off the date when she must choose one. This also allows her son, Telemachus, to grow up and provides an opportunity to safeguard some of his land, if not the fruits of it. Penelope promised the suitors that she would choose one of them once she finished weaving the funeral shawl for Odysseus' father, Laertes, but would unravel some of the shawl every night. Penelope was betrayed, however, by one of her women and the suitors used her deception as leverage to force her to choose one of them sooner. In addition, some of the serving women were sleeping with the suitors. Odysseus takes this as an insult and once he, Telemachus, and the goddess Athena have slaughtered the suitors, he calls his faithful nurse to him and discusses the loyalty of the women with her. She tells him that of the fifty women serving, twelve have gone "tramping to their shame, / thumbing their noses at me, at the queen herself!"³⁹ Odysseus calls those twelve women to him and orders them to help remove the bodies of the dead suitors, then ushers them into a dead end outside. His son Telemachus orders

"No clean death for the likes of them, by god! / Not from me—they
showered abuse on my head, / my mother's too! You sluts—the suitors'
whores!"⁴⁰

³⁹ Homer, *The Odyssey*, translated by Robert Fagles (Penguin Books: New York, 1996), 452.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 453.

Telemachus then hangs all of the women, a death that was both demeaning, since hanging put the body on display for everyone, and cruel, since hanging wasn't always a quick death.

This episode highlights the importance of loyalty among household staff. In Odysseus' case, his faithful nurse provides information on which of the women were loyal and which were disloyal. The women, too, betrayed Penelope directly when they reported on her delaying tactic to the suitors. Yet the two stories bear some important common threads. They both feature an absentee lord, a suitor, the proper courtesy due to strangers, and, what is most important to this inquiry, the death of the lady's women. *The Odyssey* is a much longer work, running to 12,000 lines, and as such, all of these elements are developed more fully than in *The Fourth Branch*. Additionally, Blodeuedd deliberately betrays Lleu and the loyalty of her women is in question. Clearly, Blodeuedd's women are loyal to her, but not to Lleu, their rightful lord. Lleu and Gwydion do not have a faithful female servant to provide the audience with a direct report about Blodeuedd's women's disloyalty, and so the inference is that they share in the disloyalty of their lady. Furthermore, this idea of shared insult and loyalty is seen in the story of *Geraint vab Erbin*.

One day, Arthur and his court go hunting, leaving behind a sleeping Gwenhwyfar and her women. Gwenhwyfar and one of her women are on their way to join the hunt when they meet Geraint, who was also left behind. The three see a dwarf, a woman, and a knight passing and Gwenhwyfar asks her maid to ascertain the identity of the knight. The dwarf slaps Gwenhwyfar's maid, drawing blood; Geraint refers to the injury as ultimately an injury done to Gwenhwyfar when he tells the knight to

“go to Gwenhwyfar, Arthur’s wife, to make amends *to her* for the insult done to the maiden by the dwarf...And that you do not dismount from the time you leave here until you are in Gwenhwyfar’s presence to make amends to her...”⁴¹

Here, the knight is responsible for the blow struck by the dwarf, his servant, adding to the idea of lords and ladies as responsible for the actions of their servants. Later in the narrative, Gwenhwyfar makes the same connection by telling Arthur, “whatever mercy you wish I will show him, lord, ... since it is a great disgrace to you, lord, for me to be insulted as for you yourself.”⁴² Also, the maiden will have no input in deciding the punishment even though she was the one struck. She is an extension of the court, and as such, Arthur says that it will be the nobles who will decide the knight’s punishment.

Even though Geraint, Gwenhwyfar, and Arthur reiterate that the injury was done to Gwenhwyfar’s maiden, the insult is transferred to Gwenhwyfar and Arthur because they must ensure the safety of the people who depend on them. This connection links Blodeuedd’s women to her crime, since they are ultimately dependent on and responsible to Lleu and not Gronw since he is not their original lord. Gronw has usurped Lleu’s legitimate place and so Blodeuedd’s women must share in her crime since they did not stay loyal to Lleu. In addition, the women obviously consider themselves guilty because they are fleeing with Blodeuedd. They may not have been all of the women in the court, but just the ones who supported Blodeuedd. The women of a court often share in the prestige and power of their lady, and suffer if her actions or reputation leads to a lesser status for her or even a crime committed by her. Furthermore, Blodeuedd’s women die in an ignoble way, drowning, and by their own fault, since they were not looking in the right direction. Telemachus clearly states that he will kill the unfaithful women in an ignoble

⁴¹ Davies, 148.

⁴² Ibid., 152.

way, hanging, for the insults they heaped upon both he and his mother; a clean death is not for traitors to the household. The complication arises, of course, in the fact that Blodeuedd's women are not overtly stated as complicit in her crime. Yet Lleu was gone for a significant amount of time, nearly a year, and the women did nothing to show their loyalty to Math or to Lleu.

Like Blodeuedd's women, Aranrhod's women are a reflection of her. Aranrhod ran away from Math's court after her failed virginity test, and even though Gwydion refers to her as a wicked woman, he never takes punitive action against Aranrhod's women or uses them against Aranrhod. These maidens stand in contrast to Aranrhod even though they reflect her as a leader in her own caer. Gwydion begrudges Aranrhod the term "maiden," yet her women are only referred to as maidens. In this way, Aranrhod's women reflect the state that she wished she had, rather than her ambiguous state as a mother but unmarried woman. The term "maiden" allows for a purity to attach itself to Aranrhod's court, even if the purity does not apply to her. The obedience of Aranrhod's maidens also reflects the obedience of the women of Teyrnnon's wife. These two groups of women, however, reflect different purposes, since Aranrhod's women sometimes appear as mere props for the story. Yet even as props, these women emphasize the isolation that Aranrhod has sought, an isolation that she likely sought before Math called her to his court. Blodeuedd's women also reflect this isolation, as Lleu goes to Math's court but leaves her behind. Blodeuedd, too, as a created woman is not as thoughtful about her betrayal. Blodeuedd's betrayal jeopardizes her women, most likely as part of the court whose advice she sought regarding Gronw. Blodeuedd, by seeking the opinions of others, involves them in the betrayal, even more so because they do not object to their

new lord. Goewin's maidens were forced out of the chamber, but Blodeuedd welcomed Gronw and no mention of her maidens' actions regarding this choice is mentioned. In the same narrative, three different sets of maidens reflect their mistresses and their mistresses' attitudes towards the men in these stories. There is also the collective noun "the court," which presumably includes both men and women, but those who serve their lords and ladies and provide, at best, information about visitors and, in Blodeuedd's case, some support for her own decisions.

Distressed Ladies in *Historia Peredur vab Efwarg*

Another medieval literature scholar wrote that previous medieval scholars focused on the way that female characters added to the reader's understanding of male characters, rather than focusing just on the women themselves.⁴³ In the *Historia Peredur vab Efwarg*, many of the unnamed women provide the hero with the opportunity to be strong, helpful, and chaste. Some of these women exist in the tale only as props for Peredur, yet others highlight the difficult nature of living in a world dominated by armed men and many help to further the plot as advisors to Peredur.

Peredur is the son of Efwarg, who was once an earl in the North, but who, along with six of his seven sons, died in warfare. Convinced that her son is safer away from the earldom, Peredur's mother takes him "to wasteland and wilderness, leaving behind the inhabited regions."⁴⁴ One day, Peredur sees three knights from Arthur's court and is so interested in them that he tells his mother that he wants to become a knight. He sets off after fashioning himself some knightly accoutrements from branches and taking his holly darts with him. Peredur's mother gives him some advice before he sets off:

"Go to Arthur's court," she said, "where you will find the best men and most generous and most brave. Wherever you see a church chant the Our Father to it. If you see food and drink, if you are in need of it and no one has the courtesy or goodness to offer it to you, help yourself. If you hear a scream, go towards it, and a woman's scream above any other scream in the world. If you see a fair jewel, take it and give it to someone else, and because of that you will be praised. If you see a beautiful lady, make love to her even though she does not want you-it will make you a better and braver man than before."⁴⁵

⁴³ Amalia Slobogian, "Her Secret Identity: Female Fair Unknowns in Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur*," 2-3.

⁴⁴ Davies, 65.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 66-7. Aronstein emphasizes Echard's interpretation of this passage as showing the greedy side of Norman/French customs and, by extension, Arthur, 156.

Peredur's mother's last act with her son is to give him advice that he follows, for she is the only authority figure that he has known. His mother has isolated Peredur and herself, along with some servants, in what Susan Aronstein has argued is a deliberate Welsh rejection of the "feudal identity that, in many ways, conformed to the political and social norms of the invader."⁴⁶ Also, the advice that Peredur's mother gives him reflects a different attitude towards others. Aronstein further states that, "Peredur's mother fears that the colonizer might persuade Peredur to mis-recognize himself as an assimilated subject—as a knight."⁴⁷ Indeed, after Peredur fashions the equine trappings and leaves his mother, she dies, presumably of a broken heart.

The first woman that Peredur meets after he begins his journey is sometimes referred to as the Tent Maiden, but in *Peredur* she is described as "a beautiful, auburn-haired maiden" and "the wife of the Proud One of the Clearing, (Syberw Llanerch)."⁴⁸ The wife of Syberw Llanerch, unlike many of the other women in *Peredur*, has a better life before Peredur approaches her. He has just set off on his journey to Arthur's Court and traveled two days in the wilderness, without anything to eat or drink. Accordingly, Peredur follows his mother's advice when he comes to a tent; he prays outside it as if it were a church.

The entrance to the pavilion was open and there was a golden chair near the door, and a beautiful, auburn-haired maiden sitting in the chair with a frontlet of gold on her forehead, and sparkling stones in the frontlet, and a thick gold ring on her hand. Peredur dismounted and went inside. The maiden made him welcome and greeted him. At the far end of the pavilion he could see a table and two flagons full of wine, and two loaves of white bread, and chops of the flesh of suckling pigs. "My mother," said Peredur, "told me that wherever I saw good and drink, to take it." "Then go, lord, to

⁴⁶ Aronstein, 141, 154.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 154.

⁴⁸ Glenys Goetinck, *Peredur: A Study of Welsh Tradition in the Grail Legends* (Cardiff; University of Wales Press, 1975) refers to her as the Tent Maiden, 209, 223, Davies, 67, 78.

the table,” she said, “and God’s welcome to you.” Peredur went to the table and he took half the food and drink for himself, and left the other half for the maiden. And when he had finished eating, he got up and went to the maiden. “My mother,” he said, “told me to take a fair jewel wherever I saw one.” “Then take it, friend,” she said. “I certainly won’t begrudge it to you.” Peredur took the ring. And he went down on his knee and kissed the maiden. And he took his horse and set off. After that, the knight who owned the pavilion arrived—he was the Proud One of the Clearing. And he saw the horse’s tracks. “Tell me,” he said, “who has been here since I left?” “An odd-looking man, lord,” she said. And she described Peredur’s appearance and manner. “Tell me,” he said, “has he been with you?” “No he has not, by my faith,” she said. “By my faith, I don’t believe you. And until I find him to avenge my anger and shame, you shall not stay two nights in one and the same place.” And the knight got up to go and look for Peredur.⁴⁹

This entire passage highlights Peredur’s adherence, though perhaps his naïveté as well, to his mother’s advice. Furthermore, this passage also demonstrates that the wife of Syberw Llanerch is perhaps not as hospitable as she should be. Many of the other people that Peredur meets, and Owain and Gereint in their own tales, offer real hospitality to the knights by offering them not only food, but sometimes purchasing food for their guest even though they are in dire financial straits.⁵⁰ Yet the wife of Syberw Llanerch has plenty of food, and choice food as well. The description of the setting highlights the opulence of her surroundings. Certainly, she and her husband are traveling, but she is seated in a golden chair and her clothing is quite opulent as well, with sparkling stones on the gold frontlet on her forehead and she is wearing a thick gold ring. The bread, too, is white, not some of the coarser varieties that many people in the Middle Ages ate, yet even with all her wealth, the woman does not offer Peredur any food.

The wife of Syberw Llanerch also does not offer any information, but accedes to Peredur’s requests, each of which is started with the phrase, “My mother told me,”

⁴⁹ Davies, 67.

⁵⁰ Enid’s father in *Gereint vab Erbin*, the Lady of the Fortress in *Peredur*, for example, who share what little food they have while dressed in clothing that was showing its age.

emphasizing his adherence to her advice and probably also emphasizing his naïveté to the wife of Syberw Llanerch. Other scholars have discussed Peredur's behavior, and the woman's responses, in terms of her fear/surprise at such a strange sight: a youth dressed in wild clothing and riding a bony nag complete "with its untidy, slovenly trappings" who stops outside their tent and recites a prayer.⁵¹ If the woman is supposed to be surprised by Peredur's appearance to the point where she does not offer him refreshment, then her husband's absence would exacerbate this emotion. A woman, alone, for no attendants are mentioned, waiting in the wilderness for her husband to return, is accosted by "an odd-looking man" in both "appearance and manners."⁵² Her reticence, but basic politeness, seems quite clear. Furthermore, she uses the terms, "lord" and "friend" when speaking to Peredur, quite likely trying to highlight that she means him no harm. She also "made him welcome and greeted him" and after he asks for food, says, "God's welcome to you." This last phrase is important, for when Math vab Mathonwy is angry with Gwydion son of Dôn and Gilfaethwy son of Dôn, he does not greet them with this phrase.⁵³ Later in *Peredur* the black-haired maiden greets Peredur by saying, "May you not receive God's welcome."⁵⁴ The wife of Syberw Llanerch, therefore, is being polite, but perhaps only just since she is unsure how to treat a youth whose station and identity are not easy to decipher.

Also, Syberw Llanerch quickly condemns his wife as a cheater and a liar. She has given him no cause, but her story sounds improbable and she is also missing her ring.

⁵¹ Ibid., 68, for the "untidy, slovenly trappings," and Goetinck, 78. Goetinck disagrees with this interpretation since the wife of Syberw Llanerch is an Otherworld being.

⁵² Davies, 67.

⁵³ Ibid., 52 and the note on 242. When Gwydion and Gilfaethwy came to Math, his immediate response is, "Well, have you come here to make amends?" Davies attributes Math's response to his anger at the situation, 242.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 100.

Since women often gave tokens of affection to their lovers, it would be logical to attribute unfaithfulness to her. Yet, Arawn, king of Annwfn, offers his wife to Pwyll, “[I will] give you the most beautiful woman you have ever seen to sleep with you every night,”⁵⁵ yet when Arawn’s wife explains that her husband [Pwyll, in fact,] has not touched her for the past year, Arawn believes her and explains that he and Pwyll traded places.⁵⁶ Arawn believes his wife because she did not know about the switch and because her reaction is quite strong. Syberw Llanerch, however, does not believe his wife and punishes her. The wife of Syberw Llanerch must travel, and continue to travel until Peredur can be found and her husband’s honor can be restored. Peredur later meets the wife of Syberw Llanerch “on a lean, sweaty horse. [The lady] greeted him...and explained her situation and the reason for the journey.”⁵⁷ Peredur immediately comes to her defense because he said “I am the knight on whose account you have suffered this distress, and whoever brought this upon you will be sorry.”⁵⁸ In fact, Syberw Llanerch approaches and asked Peredur about the knight that he is searching for and Peredur is quite rude. “Be silent,” said Peredur. “I am the one you are after, and by my faith, the maiden is innocent on my account.”⁵⁹ Instead of believing Peredur, who is an accomplished knight now, the two fight and Peredur wins. Peredur judges Syberw Llanerch, forcing him to go “back the way [he] came to let it be known that the girl has been found innocent, and that as recompense for the insult [Peredur] overthrew [him].”⁶⁰ In this instance, neither Peredur’s word nor the wife’s will appease Syberw Llanerch, quite probably because he

⁵⁵ Ibid., 4.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 7.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 78.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 78

⁵⁹ Ibid., 78

⁶⁰ Ibid., 78.

is proud. In this passage, the wife's difficulties are not completely detailed, most likely due to the emphasis on Peredur's good qualities, his skills as a knight and his determination to use physical prowess to prove the innocence and redeem others' reputations.⁶¹ In the *Parzival* and in *Perceval*, the wife is depicted in more dire circumstances, reduced to wearing the same garments as the ones she started with and the deprivation of food for her horse, and Goetinck notes that the Welsh version does not go into detail precisely because Peredur's behavior emphasizes his positive qualities, instead of dwelling on the negative qualities of Syberw Llanerch.⁶²

The wife of Syberw Llanerch is clearly trapped in her marriage. Her husband travels, since he is never associated with a location other than his initial one. The wife has lived in relative wealth, but her constant traveling has taken its toll. No description of her clothing or of her jewels in the text shows that her circumstances have altered drastically. In fact, her horse is lean and sweaty, emphasizing her consistent travel. Furthermore, she does not have any attendants, which is not uncommon in this text for women traveling. Yet the lack of any title for her husband, for "earl," "king," and "squire" are often used in this text for men with land and "iarlles" for women,⁶³ focuses on his lack of land, his lack of attachment to anyone place. Furthermore, Syberw Llanerch forces this situation on his wife. She was waiting in a tent for him, one which did not apparently have a bed, since no bed is mentioned, and even though she has demonstrable wealth, this wealth is fleeting once her husband suspects her of being unfaithful. The end of her episode shows that her

⁶¹Peredur also redeems the reputations of the dwarfs who pronounce his future greatness and avenge the blows which Cai gave to them. He sends nineteen knights back to Arthur's court, the knight who took the goblet, 69, the knight who always pillaged from Arthur, 70, sixteen knights, 70-71, and the knight he marries to his foster sister, 74.

⁶²Goetinck, 45, 226.

⁶³There are three earls mentioned in this tale, the father of the Lady of the Fortress, the earl who takes her land, Peredur's father, and two countesses, the Countess of the Feats, and the countess whose lands the witches of Caer Loyw have destroyed.

reputation has been redeemed, yet she still must travel back with her husband in order to clear her name. Syberw Llanerch did not believe his wife and in some ways, that can never be undone. Her reputation is only cleared once a man uses physical force and as a woman, she could never accomplish this on her own. Her reputation is at the mercy of men, and in Peredur's case, a strange man that she has not seen for quite some time.

Peredur's journey continues after he has stayed with both of his uncles and he meets his next distressed damsel, his foster sister. She is crying and trying to place the corpse of a man on the saddle of a horse. Peredur learns from her that he is the cause of his mother's death, that the two dwarfs in Arthur's court were once servants of his father's, that she is his foster sister, and that her husband is the dead man in her hands, "killed by the knight who is in the forest. And do not go near him in case you are killed too."⁶⁴ Peredur reassures her that he will assist her in burying her husband and then attacking the knight, and adds, "if I can get revenge I will do so."⁶⁵ Peredur defeats the knight, and just as the Proud One asked, this knight also asks for mercy. Peredur grants him mercy but binds him by telling him to "take this woman as a wife and treat her as well as [he has] treated other women, since [he] killed her husband for no reason," and to go to Arthur's court.⁶⁶ After agreeing to Peredur's terms, "the knight sat the woman properly on a horse beside him and came to Arthur's court" as well as repeating the threat to Cai.⁶⁷

Again, this episode allows Peredur to show his strength in arms as well as his strength of character. He tells his foster sister that although he is not responsible for her

⁶⁴ Davies, 73.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 74.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 74.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 74.

trouble, he will help her to resolve her present predicament. Goetinck has noted the difficulty for the audience with Peredur's resolution, especially since his foster sister is now married to the man who killed her husband.⁶⁸ Yet the knight appears to treat his foster sister well, since he seats her "properly" on his horse. Furthermore, Peredur has resolved his foster sister's problem, the lack of a husband. He cannot do anything about the death of his mother, so he tackles the problems at hand, namely, burying the husband's body and finding a new husband for his foster sister.

Yet, Peredur's resolution relieves him of his burden to his foster sister. Indeed, that may very well have been why she called him "accursed Peredur," and said, "little relief [has he] ever brought me from my misery."⁶⁹ The death of her foster mother deprived the foster sister of a support and an alternative home. Now that her husband is dead, she has lost her primary support and shelter, but in fact, she may have been forced into marrying an unsuitable man because of the death of her foster mother. Her silence once Peredur has proclaimed the knight's punishment hints at either her resignation or her acceptance. She is, in many respects, quite practical as a character. She stops crying once Peredur tells her to and she accompanies Peredur as he looks for revenge on her behalf. Peredur's foster sister, like many other women facing difficult lives without male protection, faces the reality of her situation. She has given Peredur more information about himself, showing that she is helpful, but she also acquiesces once it becomes clear that Peredur will not take care of her himself.

There is also, of course, the composer of the tale. While this episode plays out differently in Chretien's *Perceval*, the composer of the Welsh tale emphasizes

⁶⁸ Goetinck, 211.

⁶⁹ Davies, 73.

expediency, efficiency, and harsh realities in this episode and others. Here, a woman cannot remain alone, but she also must not deter the hero from his quest, for he has much more to accomplish and many other women to assist and men to defeat. The foster sister's fate lies in the hand of the men who surround her and just as Peredur's mother fled to the wilderness for safety, this woman has found both danger and safety in her travels. She must rely upon a passing knight to avenge her, for she cannot do so herself. In fact, she accompanies the knight who killed her husband to Arthur's court where she will be surrounded by a community which will protect and aid her, quite possibly in the form of Gwenhwyfar and her ladies. The wilderness proves unsafe for her and so she must retire to the safety of a community, as a wife to the man who defeated her husband, in order to be secure.

Other maidens, however, have their own small estates, which provide them with safety inside the wilderness. The Lady of the Fortress, Morwyn Y Gaer, lives in "a great desolate forest," where there are no "tracks of men nor herds in the forest, only thickets and vegetation. And when [Peredur] comes to the far end of the forest, he can see a great ivy-covered fortress with many strong towers. And near the gate the vegetation is taller than elsewhere."⁷⁰ After Peredur enters the hall, he sees five maidens and in regards to "the principal maiden amongst them, he was sure that he had never seen such a beautiful sight. She wore an old dress of tattered brocaded silk that had once been good...the maiden greeted Peredur and embraced him," showing him true hospitality even though her home shows outward signs of neglect. In fact, two nuns enter shortly after she has welcomed Peredur, "one carrying a flagon full of wine and the other six loaves of white

⁷⁰ Ibid., 74.

bread.”⁷¹ The nuns inform the lady that the convent can only provide this food for everyone in the castle, including the four other maidens and the nineteen lads. The Lady demonstrates her hospitality, moreover, by giving Peredur more of the food than anyone else, but he refuses to eat more than the others and shares it instead.

After dinner, a comfortable room is provided for Peredur and, once he has left, the lads advise their foster sister to “go to the squire in the chamber nearby, and offer [herself] to him however he wants, either as his wife or as his mistress.” Her response is quite clear, “That, she said, “is something which is not proper—I, who have never been with a man, offering myself to him before he courts me. I cannot do that on any account.”⁷² The foster brothers then threaten that if she doesn’t do as they asked, they “will [her] here to [her] enemies.”⁷³ Peredur is again confronted with a crying woman, and just as he did with his foster sister, he comes to the aid of the Morwyn Y Gaer.

Her father has died, leaving her defenseless to the depredations of the men nearby. Indeed, one of them, an earl, was interested in marrying her, but she did not wish to marry him and her father did not force her.⁷⁴ Now that he has passed away, the land has been attacked and appropriated by the earl and his men. As long as the fortress had food, then there was no need to worry, but the nuns are also running out of food and the lady cannot rebuke the earl for much longer. The morwyn tells Peredur everything, including the advice her foster brothers gave her, telling Peredur “so I have come to offer myself to you, lord, in whatever way you please, in exchange for helping us to escape or

⁷¹ Ibid., 75.

⁷² Ibid., 75.

⁷³ Ibid., 75.

⁷⁴ An interesting idea, since Rhiannon rejects Gwawl.

else defending us here.”⁷⁵ Peredur vows to do one or the other, but does not take advantage of the Morwyn y Gaer even though he finds her quite beautiful.

Peredur then defeats several men the next day until he defeats the head of the earl’s retinue. Peredur forces him to return the third of the countess’s realm which he appropriated and to supply the fortress with food and drink for a hundred men as well as weapons and horses. Peredur repeats this process on the following day, regaining the next third of the countess’s realm and forcing the men to provide additional supplies for the fortress’s inhabitants. On the third day, Peredur defeats the earl and forces him not only to return the countess’s realm and provide supplies for three hundred men, but to also place the earl’s kingdom and himself under the dominion of the countess. Peredur arranges the tribute sent to the lady and then, after three weeks, he leaves, although he loves her.

Goetinck connects this episode, like many others in Peredur, to the idea of sovereignty. The Morwyn y Gaer, for Goetinck, is a representation of the land and a goddess who is physically united with a man so that he may take control/ownership of the land.⁷⁶ Yet she appears all too real in this passage, and so even if this episode touches upon older stories regarding men having sex with a goddess in order to possess the land, the author has rendered a woman who is facing real depredations at the hands of a man. Just as Peredur’s foster sister faced the loss of her husband and her protection, the Morwyn y Gaer has lost her protection, her father, and her sustenance through the loss of her land. She is reduced to seeking aid from a stranger, someone upon whom she has no claim, and since there is no familial or foster relationship between them, she must offer

⁷⁵Ibid., 76.

⁷⁶ Goetinck, “Sovereignty Themes in ‘Peredur,’ ‘Owein,’ and ‘Gereint,’” 129-155, Ford, 27, MacCana, 55-56, although MacCana is referring to Rhiannon and not to anyone in the Welsh Arthurian tales.

herself to Peredur even though he hasn't wooed her or expressed interest in her. She is reduced, literally, to trading her body for her life and the lives of those in her fortress. The nuns are protected from outright violence, yet even so, they are depleting their food stores in an effort to feed those in the fortress. Her body is the morwyn's last possession and although she finds it distasteful, she offers herself. Furthermore, she does not repeat the offer nor does she urge Peredur to stay so that they might marry. Instead, she allows him to go on his way and it is Peredur who reminds her to send for him if there is ever any trouble. In fact, it is not until after he is ready to leave that the Lady asks for his name, providing the audience with a question: did she only call him "lord" for three weeks while he arranged everything? Or is Peredur claiming his identity by claiming his name?⁷⁷

The Morwyn Y Gaer may well have presented the authors of Arthurian Romances with an opportunity to present a woman, powerless in terms of knights, but who wields her feminine arsenal in order to secure safety for herself and those under her protection. There are nineteen lads in her fortress each of them so brave, although they may have been too young to do more than defend the fortress, the morwyn prevails upon Peredur subtly to defend her and protect her realm. In fact, one line most likely provoked Peredur's defense of the morwyn, since she tells him that, "if [the earl] takes me, my fate will be no better than if I were given to his stable lads."⁷⁸ This possibility seems unlikely, yet she uses this idea to evoke a reaction from Peredur. More importantly, the morwyn's statement emphasizes her precarious position. Her body is her commodity and her only

⁷⁷ Jane Bliss, *Naming and Namelessness in Medieval Romance*, (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2008), 58. This seems to be what Bliss means when she says that names come and go, but it feels more like a revelation of Peredur's identity, Aronstein, 163.

⁷⁸ Davies, 76.

bargaining chip. She can use it to her own advantage or allow the earl to use it to her disadvantage. Furthermore, the earl will not be using her body himself, but will give her to his men for their pleasure. Also, the morwyn is referred to as a *lady* or *maiden* in the text up to this point, but when Peredur defeats the three champions, the earl's retinue chief, his steward, and the earl himself, he asks each of them about the *countess's* land, emphasizing her rank. The Morwyn y Gaer begins her plea to Peredur in fact with the statement, "My father owned this court, along with the best earldom in the world,"⁷⁹ firmly placing herself within the knightly elite and claiming a nobleman, and therefore, a noblewoman's place within society. For Peredur to treat her badly would not only be against his character, but also nearly impossible because she has carefully crafted her narrative to reveal her high position and her urgent need.⁸⁰ Even though she tells her foster brothers that it would not be proper for her to offer herself to Peredur, she goes to Peredur, crying, and tells him that she is indeed offering herself to him.

In addition, the morwyn has shown Peredur every bit of hospitality and elevated him as a guest in her home even though she has many people to feed and little means to feed them. Still, she greets and embraces Peredur when she meets him, then sits next to him to entertain him. She also tries to give him a larger share of the food than everyone else and then provides him with "a comfortable place to sleep" at his bidding.⁸¹ She shows true hospitality, as opposed to the wife of Syberw Llanerch, in every action she takes towards her guest. Her foster brothers also take good care of their guest since "their manners and their service were excellent" in caring for Peredur's horse and disarming

⁷⁹ Ibid., 76.

⁸⁰ Winward, 87-88, discusses Goewin's careful phrasing to Math as a manipulation "within the patriarchal system."

⁸¹ Davies, 75.

him.⁸² The hospitable welcome which Peredur receives highlights the elevated nature of the people living in the fortress and shows how worthy they are of being helped, instead of overrun.

As we have seen with the wife of Syberw Llanerch, and indirectly with Peredur's foster sister, Peredur also causes distress and trouble to women. Peredur has arrived at a fair river valley filled with "many pavilions there of different colours" and a "number of watermills and windmills."⁸³ A man approached him, a miller, and Peredur asked him for lodging and to borrow money so that Peredur could pay for food and drink for the miller's household. The miller agreed to lend Peredur the money and Peredur promised to repay the miller. Unfortunately, Peredur was distracted by the beauty of the Empress on the first day of the tournament and did not compete or win any money. The second night, therefore, Peredur must borrow money again from the miller, and "the miller's wife was angry with Peredur."⁸⁴ This continues the next day and night, angering the miller's wife again, until the miller hit Peredur "a large blow with the handle of an axe" and told him to either go to the tournament or "turn [his] head away."⁸⁵ Peredur went to the tournament, and then defeated many men, sending "the men as a gift to the empress, and the horses and armour as a gift to the miller's wife, as a guarantee of the money he had borrowed."⁸⁶ Peredur's success shows his strength of arms and the gifts of horses and armor to the miller's wife show his ability to compensate those he has wronged, even temporarily. After Peredur has met the Empress, he sends the challenger's goblets to the miller's wife as well, and these costly items, a golden goblet, a wild animal's claw goblet,

⁸² Ibid., 75.

⁸³ Ibid., 92.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 92.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 92.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 92-3.

and a crystal goblet, highlight Peredur's magnanimity, his bravery, and his dutiful nature. He was only distracted from the tournament because of the Empress's beauty, not because he was being disrespectful. The miller's wife feels unkindly toward Peredur for the money that he borrows from the miller weighs upon her, leaving her financially insecure. In turn, this situation causes difficulty for the miller, who must take action to remind Peredur of his duties. The miller's wife, however, receives great compensation since she has received all the horses and arms from the knights in the tournament.

The miller's wife's reaction highlights the importance of harmony in the household. The miller overrides her initial concern and his faith in Peredur is rewarded but the brief depiction also shines a light on domestic tranquility and the disagreements within marriage. The wife, and the household, is initially placed under financial strain in order to house Peredur and feed everyone. Her hospitality, however, is not in question, for she is only upset with Peredur after he returns without money the next day. Indeed, the miller's wife's reaction to Peredur's payments is not recorded, but presumably once her husband reminds Peredur of his duty and Peredur begins sending the horses and arms to the miller's wife, this reestablishes harmony in the household, in regards to the relationship between the husband and wife and the wife and the guest. Even though it is not covered in the text, it is easy for the audience to infer the angry conversation between the miller and his wife after Peredur has requested money a second time. Goetinck instead sees this as episode as another example of sovereignty, but this reading also negates the snapshot of the real world that the episode provides. This small view of real life placed side by side with the life of tournaments and knightly conquest and, in this tale, the extravagance of the Empress of Constantinople, recurs in the Welsh Medieval

tales, providing a glimpse of real life and stamping the Welsh versions of these tales with a distinct flavor.⁸⁷ Also, the miller's wife is not paid back directly, for the arms and horses of the knights would presumably be ransomed back by those knights, so Peredur has provided the miller's wife a chance to set her own price instead of returning the exact amount borrowed to her. Furthermore, since there were so many pavilions, the miller's wife probably received more money, or goods worth more money, than the miller lent to Peredur. In addition, Peredur sends the three goblets from the three challengers to the miller's wife, showing that his debt to her and her hospitality goes beyond mere wealth to Peredur. He also knows about the miller's wife's anger and sends the horses and arms to her directly instead of the miller from whom he borrowed the money, emphasizing his attempts to reconcile the husband and wife and to show his gratitude.

Near the end of the tale, however, Peredur is approached by a "fair-haired youth," who explains to him the significance of the head on a platter and the bloody spear from Peredur's first uncle's castle. "Lord," said the lad, "I came in the guise of the black-haired maiden to Arthur's court," and on several other occasions.⁸⁸ In her work on *Peredur*, Goetinck explains this disguise of a young man as a woman in terms of conflation. Goetinck believes that originally there were two characters, a young man carrying the spear and a young woman carrying the head, and that the Welsh composer transformed them into one being. In this way, the young woman, according to Goetinck, was several of the women aiding Peredur along his way, and the young man was often disguised as the various knights that Peredur fought. As Valente has suggested, however,

⁸⁷ Although Lindahl is discussing *Yvain* and *Owein/Iarllles*, 45, the same idea applies here, namely that the idea that these Welsh Arthurian Tales owe so much to Chretien's versions negates the Welsh touches and re-appropriation of these stories. Carl Lindahl, "Yvain's Return to Wales," *Arthuriana* 10 no. 3 Welsh Arthurian Literature (2000), 45.

⁸⁸ Davies, 102.

this interpretation emphasizes the sovereignty theme perhaps too much.⁸⁹ The world that Peredur inhabits contains, like the other Welsh Arthurian Romances, unknown places and unknown people. His journey allows for his fame to spread, but it also shows that many other people lived in a similar way to Peredur and that, for the women who lost their land, it sometimes took an outside force to restore balance in terms of land ownership and boundaries. In several other ways, the Welsh tales also exhibit a practicality that shines through the extraordinary circumstances and also provides a snapshot of real world domesticity, as in the miller's wife's episode.⁹⁰ For women who needed a warrior, surely it was easier and more beneficial to seek the aid of a stranger, someone who would not be bribed or persuaded to work against the woman due to regional loyalties or monetary compensation. These episodes also highlight the difficulties that women faced and the different ways that they coped with these situations: most of the women seek Peredur's assistance through language, while the miller's wife uses her emotions only. These women faced real difficulties that are resolved with the help of a man through strength of arms for their power lies in their words and their reputations.

⁸⁹ Valente, 1.

⁹⁰ As Goetinck states, *Peredur* often resolves issues in a practical manner, whereas *Percival* sees magical resolutions. This is apparent in the restoration of the Lady of the Forest's land, 216- 217.

Witches in *Culhwch ac Olwen* and *Historia Peredur vab Efrog*

In medieval Welsh prose, witches appear in two of the tales from the Welsh Arthurian stories, *Culhwch ac Olwen* and *Historia Peredur vab Efrog*.⁹¹ In both instances, the witches fight the men in the story; in *Peredur*, the witches even train him. As with so many other women in medieval Welsh prose, these women remain unnamed and their primary function seems to be as foils for the male characters. Yet their inclusion in these tales also hints at the different communities that the audience and the composer were aware of.

The witches in *Culhwch ac Olwen* are one of the many tasks that Ysbaddaden Bencawr assigns to Culhwch. It is only after the extended hunting of the Twrch Trwyth that the scene with the witch enters the narrative. The function of this particular scene is difficult to ascertain. The previous scenes have been quite serious, although *Culhwch ac Olwen* does contain moments of levity and some scholars have suggested that the scene with the Black Witch brings some comedy after a serious and extended one.⁹² Proinsias MacCana states that it is a scene of “knock-about anti-heroics of the encounter with the Black Witch, when she administers an unmerciful drubbing to the several warriors who tackle her before Arthur. Here we have the typical boisterous humour that has been a staple element of Celtic oral narrative throughout the ages.”⁹³

⁹¹ I will be dealing with the Black Witch daughter of the White Witch and the Witches of Caer Loyw. There is another set of witches mentioned by Ysbaddaden, but like some of the other tasks, they do not materialize in the tale again, (Och and Garm and Diasbad their [Bwlch and Cyfwlch and Syfwlch] three witches), Davies, 200. In addition, their names are likely puns, “clamour,” “shout,” Rachel Bromwich and D. Simon Evans, *Glossary to Culhwch ac Olwen* (Lampeter: Edward Mellen Press, 1992), 27, 38.

⁹² Simon Rodway, “Lecture on 11/11/2011,” Aberystwyth University and Joan N. Radner, “Interpreting Irony in Medieval Celtic Narrative: The Case of *Culhwch ac Olwen*,” *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 16 (1988), who reads the whole tale as full of deliberate hyperbole and “deadpan humour,” 47.

⁹³ MacCana, 73.

Essentially, the episode is that Arthur and his men are resting after the hunting of the Twrch Trwyth when Arthur asks about any remaining tasks. Even though several of the other tasks have not been completed, nor attempted, one of Arthur's men suggests obtaining "the blood of the Very Black Witch, daughter of the Very White Witch, from the head of the valley of Grief in the uplands of hell."⁹⁴ With such a description of the land, the audience is expecting a difficult task and a desolate landscape. Instead, the "hag's cave" is simply in the North and gives Arthur no trouble as far as its locating and reaching it.

When the men arrive, instead of entering the cave to face the Black Witch immediately, Gwyn ap Nudd and Gwythyr vab Greidawl recommend two others, Cacamwri (Servant) and Hygwydd his brother, also participants in the hunt for the Twrch Trwyth, to face the Black Witch first. Although Cacamwri helped to drag the Twrch Trwyth into the river, the two are soundly beaten by the Black Witch who attacks as soon as the men enter the cave. Indeed, the two veterans of the Twrch Trwyth hunt leave the cave "squealing and squalling" due to the Black Witch's fierceness and skill in fighting. Arthur is understandably upset by this development and must be dissuaded from attacking the Black Witch himself. Again, Gwynn ap Nudd and Gwythyr vab Greidawl suggest two other fighters tackle the witch, but both fail miserably. Indeed, the encounter between Hir Amren and Hir Eiddil and the witch is not even narrated, but rather summarized as worse than the previous encounter.

In order to accomplish this task, Arthur himself must defeat the Black Witch. Instead of grappling with her or coming too close to her, however, Arthur "aimed at the

⁹⁴ Davies, 212. Joan N. Radner, 46, notes that "Culhwch's band only performs sixteen (of the thirty-nine that Ysbaddaden assigns), and also does three tasks that the giant has not even required."

hag with Carnwennan, his knife, and struck her in the middle so she was like two vats.”⁹⁵ Then one of Arthur’s followers, Cadw of Prydein, takes possession of the blood. All four of the men previously sent to attack and kill the Black Witch, unfortunately, are too weak to even leave that place unassisted and must be loaded onto Arthur’s horse, Llamrei, and led away.

Like so many of the other tasks, the blood of the Black Witch was unnecessary to obtain Olwen from her father, Ysbaddaden. Yet the whole scenario presents a stark contrast to the hunt for Twrch Trwyth; it is shorter, more pointed, and ends only once Arthur himself has killed the witch. Yet in some ways, the fight with the Black Witch is just as difficult for Arthur’s men as the hunt was.

The Black Witch lives in an uninviting place, the valley of Grief in the uplands of Hell. Yet the place itself is not described as inhospitable or challenging to Arthur’s knights; they find her cave without asking for directions or facing any pitfalls. Her name too, may be taken as ominous, the Black Witch, since black often indicates darkness, night, and the bad things that may happen during those states.⁹⁶ Yet, her title, Black Witch, may simply indicate her coloring, especially her dark hair. In *Peredur*, one of the unnamed knights is referred to as “the black man” and the “black-haired knight.”⁹⁷ Moreover, her mother, the White Witch, may also have been called that because her coloring was fair, her hair was blond, or even that she had quite pale skin. The coloring of the Black Witch is also important for there is a section in *Peredur vab Efwrawg* where Peredur is enchanted by the sight of a raven devouring a duck on the snow. The three

⁹⁵ Davies, 213.

⁹⁶ Peredur faces the Black Knight, for instance, and loses to him and is stripped of his horse, *Ibid.*, 101. In this episode, the knight is referred to as both “black-haired” and “the black man.”

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 101.

colors, black, white, and red, remind him of his love.⁹⁸ This episode in *Peredur* resembles an episode in Irish literature, again emphasizing a woman with those colors in her face as beautiful. While Goetinck argues that this emphasis on black hair is not an ideal of Welsh beauty,⁹⁹ it does emphasize alternate ideas about beauty. The White Witch's appellation, however, may also indicate her beauty, as (g)wen often meant "white," "fair," or even "beautiful" in medieval Welsh.¹⁰⁰ The Black Witch may have been quite beautiful, but if her mother was called the White Witch, then referring to her by her hair color may have been a way to differentiate her from her mother since neither one has a name. The Black Witch daughter of the White Witch may have been the only way that Ysbaddaden knew how to refer to her for he lives quite far.

Indeed, the Black Witch is also not the only character to bear a matronymic in place of a patronymic.¹⁰¹ The omission of her father and his name could easily be due to a few factors: he was unknown or unimportant to the story, he was an unnecessary detail for a short passage, or it was her relationship to her mother that was central to the story. This last possibility seems the strongest since the two titles are quite connected, a color and the title "witch," which also makes it quite easy to remember the story since scholars have suggested that *Culhwch ac Olwen* was an oral tale with the storyteller only choosing some of the tasks, perhaps at the urging of the audience, to relate. In this case, the Black Witch, daughter of the White Witch, allows not only for practiced storytellers to remember the tasks, but for the audience to easily remember as well. Furthermore, the

⁹⁸ Ibid., 79.

⁹⁹ Goetinck argues that blonde hair was also a standard of beauty in medieval Welsh literature, but this does not mean that dark haired women were not also appreciated for their looks, simply that the two ideas could have co-existed.

¹⁰⁰ Ford, 57, lists the meanings of "wen" as "white, holy," and Rachel Bromwich and D. Simon Evans, as "fair, bright, comely," 43. Olwen, Branwen and Gwenhwyfar also have this word in their names, indicating their beauty.

¹⁰¹ Mabon son of Modron, Gwydion and Gilfaethwy are both sons of Dôn.

lack of physical description allows the audience and storyteller to conjure up their own ideas about witches, building on whatever previous stories they may have heard.

The other character with a strong matronymic, Mabon son of Modron, is an important character to the story of *Culhwch ac Olwen* as his location poses a significant difficulty for Arthur's knights to discover. Indeed, scholars have discussed the meaning of Mabon son of Modron's name, but no definite theories have proven satisfactory other than that his name probably means "Boy, son of Mother."¹⁰² This simplicity of naming, although Mabon and Modron probably contained greater significance to medieval Welsh listeners, also highlights the straightforward story of both the composer of *Culhwch ac Olwen* and the story's deep roots in the Celtic past. Indeed, as medieval audiences did not need a full description of Robin Hood since they "knew" him, so too, the audience for *Culhwch ac Olwen* did not need more information about the Black Witch, only what would happen to her at Arthur's hands.

The Black Witch does not need to be described in her physical aspect for she is a stock character and her physical appearance does not factor into the plot, just her fighting ability. This is also true of male characters in *Peredur* and *Iarllles*. The black knight of the well who defeats Cynon is described as sitting on "a pure black horse, dressed in brocaded silk of pure black, and a banner of pure black linen on his spear."¹⁰³ Her strength is not remarked upon as surprising, but then again, neither is the next set of witches, simply the damage that they have inflicted as a result of their strength. In comparison, "Cai placed a stake between her hands. She [Custennin's wife] squeezed the

¹⁰² Davies, 270.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 120.

stake until it was a twisted branch,”¹⁰⁴ showing Custennin’s wife’s strength connected to her joy.

The Black Witch’s strength is important because it marks her as a worthy adversary for Arthur’s warriors and even though she does not have the support of any followers, she, like the Twrch Trwyth, does serious physical harm to Arthur’s men. She is also quite intelligent, for she attacks the men first before they have a serious chance of cornering her in her cave and adjusting their attacks to her terrain. The Black Witch also disarms Cacamwri and Hygwydd, emphasizing her fighting abilities and providing Arthur’s men with important information on how to approach her. In fact, Arthur kills her by taking aim from the cave’s entrance rather than approaching her and engaging in hand to hand combat, or “wrestling.”

From a feminist perspective, the encounter with the Black Witch seems a nearly perfect example of the “Other,” for the Black Witch is alone, living near the border of the world and hell (in juxtaposition to the “known” world of Arthur’s court), she resists initial attacks but is defeated by a superior male, and she is then turned into a commodity. Her attachment only to her mother also indicates that she is outside of the society created by Arthur and his warriors, just as Ysbaddaden is outside this society. Indeed, no one at Arthur’s court knows Olwen daughter of Ysbaddaden and Ysbaddaden’s appearance is quite different from the warriors in Arthur’s band, similar in fact, to giants in Irish mythology.¹⁰⁵

This episode, however, bears similarities to the Twrch Trywth episode in that the Black Witch is something other than human. According to one of his followers, the

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 191.

¹⁰⁵ Radner, 51.

Twrch Trwyth was once human¹⁰⁶ and the Black Witch seems human in that her name is similar to many of Arthur's other warriors' names, so-so son of so-so, or in her case, daughter of. Indeed, some of the same warriors are facing the Black Witch who also faced the Twrch Trwyth, leading to some confusion about the apparent death of Cacamwri in the hunt, and highlighting that she is a threat to Arthur's men but not as great a threat as the Twrch Trwyth.

A comparison of some general aspects of the two episodes seems important for the context of the Black Witch episode. Initially, the Twrch Trwyth is in Ireland, a place that is both far away, but also known to the composer and the audience. Unlike the Black Witch, the Twrch Trwyth is quite mobile and rampages the countryside; the Black Witch stays within her own cave for she is outnumbered at least seven to one. The battle between the Twrch Trwyth and Arthur's men ends with a huge loss of Arthur's men and because this a more serious episode, the Black Witch inflicts serious damage rather than killing Arthur's men. Furthermore, the Twrch Trwyth poses a serious threat to the land. The Black Witch can also be seen in this light. Adding her blood to the list of feats that Culhwch must fulfill automatically makes her blood rare and difficult to obtain.¹⁰⁷ Yet the Black Witch does not seem to pose a threat to the surrounding countryside as far as the text relates, but historians have seen witches and the accusation of witchcraft as a way to label difficult and non-conformist women.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁶ Davies, 209.

¹⁰⁷ Also, MacCana sees these two episodes, the hunt for the Twrch Trwyth and the Black Witch as grafts onto the framework of the hero rescuing the giant's daughter, 66-67, since Arthur was already credited with these triumphs.

¹⁰⁸ Peter Beresford Ellis, *Celtic Women: Women in Celtic Society and Literature* (London: Constable and Company, Ltd., 1995) discusses "witches" in one of his chapters, but he is not discussing the idea of witches but the labeling of women as witches for religious and political reasons.

The other witches of note are to be found in *Historia Peredur vab Efwawg*. These witches also have no names, but rather a title, the witches of Caer Loyw. These witches play an important, if slightly odd, role in the story. Initially, Peredur is introduced to them when he stays at the castle of a “large handsome woman seated in a chair” who warns him

“You would do well lord” said the lady “to go somewhere else to sleep” because “there are nine witches here, friend,” she said “together with their father and mother. They are the witches of Caer Loyw. And by daybreak we shall be no nearer to making our escape than to being killed. And they have taken over and laid waste the land except for this one house.”¹⁰⁹

Peredur agrees to stay the night and is awakened by the shrieking of one of the watchmen. Peredur comes quickly to the aid of the watchman¹¹⁰ and “attacked the witch and struck her on the head with a sword until her helmet and mail cap spread out like a dish on her head.”¹¹¹ She then says, “Your mercy, fair Peredur son of Efwawg, and the mercy of God!”¹¹² Peredur is surprised and asks how she know him and she tells him,

“It was fated and foretold that I would suffer grief at your hands, and that you would receive a horse and weapons from me. And you will stay with me for a while as I teach you how to ride your horse and handle your weapons.” “This is how I shall show you mercy” he replied. “Give your word that you will never do harm again to this countess’s land.” Peredur took assurance to that effect, and with the countess’s permission he set off with the witch to the witches’ court. And there he stayed for three successive weeks. Then Peredur chose his horse and weapons and went on his way.”¹¹³

One of the interesting facets to the training episodes in *Peredur* is the specific training and the time frame. While Peredur is with each uncle for only one day and night,

¹⁰⁹ Davies, 78.

¹¹⁰ This is an important point since Peredur is following his mother’s instructions, “If you hear a scream go towards it,” Ibid., 66, even though his first uncle tells him to disregard his mother’s guidelines, 72.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 79.

¹¹² Ibid., 79.

¹¹³ Ibid., 79.

he stays with the witches for three weeks. At the first uncle's castle, Peredur watches two of his cousins sparring with sticks and shields, and then he spars with his yellow-haired cousin at the urging of his uncle. Peredur bests his cousin, prompting his uncle to pronounce that he "will be the best swordsman in this Island."¹¹⁴ Peredur leaves the following day with his own horse and then comes to his second uncle's castle. Peredur's second uncle urges him to take up a sword and use it on a large iron column, testing Peredur's strength and his skill with a sword. After Peredur successfully breaks the sword and the column three times and is unable to rejoin either the third time, his second uncle states that he is "the best swordsman in the kingdom."¹¹⁵ Peredur has gained two-thirds of his strength and once he has reached his full strength, he "will surrender to no one."¹¹⁶ Peredur witnesses the bloody spear and head on the platter that night and then leaves in the morning to continue his journey.

In comparison, Peredur has learned specific skills while under his uncles' tutelage. Each stay, however, only lasts a day and Peredur leaves with essentially the same weapons and horse with which he entered. When he joins the witches of Caer Loyw, Peredur stays for three days and leaves with new weapons and a horse, not only finishing his training, but becoming a real warrior as his uncles said. Instead, the witches do not say anything to Peredur when he leaves and no specific training is mentioned in this passage as if this episode needed to be shortened or rushed for some reason.

After training with the witches, Peredur leaves with a horse and weapons and continues on his journey. Near the end of his tale, Peredur encounters the witches again, this time as enemies. Peredur has entered the Castle of Wonders and a young blond man

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 71.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 72.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 73.

approaches him and tells him that “the witches of Caer Loyw who killed [his cousin]. And they made your uncle lame. And I am your cousin, too, and it is foretold that you will avenge that.”¹¹⁷ Gwalchmai and Peredur discuss the situation and “send to Arthur and his war-band, to ask him to come against the witches. And they began to fight with the witches. And one of the witches slew a man of Arthur’s before Peredur’s eyes, and Peredur bade her desist.” The witch kills two more men and Peredur

“drew his sword and struck the witch on top of her helmet, so that the helmet and all the armour and the head were split in two. She gave a scream and told the other witches to flee, and said that it was Peredur, the man who had been learning horsemanship with them and who was fated to kill them. Then Arthur and his retinue attacked the witches, and all the witches of Caer Loyw were killed.”¹¹⁸

The Witches of Caer Loyw occupy a strange role in *Peredur*. Initially they are a scourge upon a hospitable woman. Their depredations upon her household have taken quite a toll, yet as soon as Peredur confronts one of them, he is welcome to finish his training with them. Goetinck has highlighted the tripartite training that Peredur undergoes, but his first two trainers are his uncles, not women.¹¹⁹ While the text indicates that the witches in *Peredur* attack with their father and mother, every witch that Peredur encounters personally is female. Just like the Black Witch daughter of the White Witch, the Witches of Caer Loyw are fierce combatants. They are so skilled in fighting that they are qualified to complete Peredur’s training, a task previously reserved for males related to him on his mother’s side. This is important because there is no apparent familial relationship between Peredur and the witches, and again, the witches that Peredur attacks are female warriors. In addition, Peredur receives a horse and weapons from the witches

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 102.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 102.

¹¹⁹ Goetinck, 199-205, 277.

in much the same manner as he did from his uncles. Peredur's training parallels the Irish hero Cu Chulainn, who is sent to finish his training with Scathach, "at whose military academy all the warriors of Ireland were sent to learn their skill at arms."¹²⁰ The tales surrounding Cu Chulainn, however, are much descriptive about the skills that Cu Chulainn learned from Scathach. The parallel, however also lends an interesting theme of two sets of training with men and a final training with women. In Cu Chulainn's case, Sjoestedt-Jonval has suggested that this final training has a sexual component which is not apparent in *Peredur*.¹²¹ Indeed, as Goetinck has discussed, Peredur actually refrains from sexual relations with available women.¹²² The witches of Caer Loyw might once have served this purpose, but the text does not support Peredur's time with the witches as part of his sexual maturity. Instead, his training focused on improving his ability with weapons and horse-back riding.

The witches are also formidable enough to require Arthur's knights in order to ensure their defeat. Gwalchmai's ability to persuade people with speech is not even a possibility in this instance, possibly because the witches are too fierce or they have already defeated Peredur's cousin. Earlier, Gwalchmai persuaded Peredur to join Arthur and Cai says, "He [Gwalchmai] does more with his fair words than we by force of arms."¹²³ Indeed, Peredur asks the witch to stop after she has already killed one of Arthur's men, but his words have no effect. Instead, she kills another man as her response. Peredur asks her again after she has killed the second man, but she does not stop.

¹²⁰ Ellis, 14-15.

¹²¹ Sjoestedt-Jonval, 92-93.

¹²² Goetinck, 205, 216, 255.

¹²³ Davies, 81.

There is also the idea of prophecy and the power of words in these two episodes. In both instances, someone has prophesied a future for Peredur which he does not know of himself. In the first meeting, the witch tells Peredur that it was prophesied that he would finish his training with the witches. However, his training is covered quite quickly in the text and the witches never appear concerned that they have trained the very man who is also prophesied to kill them. Indeed, the witch who does say this near the end of the tale has already killed three men. It is possible that she did not recognize Peredur when she attacked and killed the three men, yet this leads to a question of the spoken word and its strength within *Peredur*. Peredur's blond cousin presents himself to Peredur and explains the situation with the witches and then Peredur and Gwalchmai ask Arthur and his warriors to help them fight the witches. Yet the witches only speak after Peredur has attacked them and then they, too, highlight the prophecy regarding Peredur.¹²⁴ Peredur's words do not affect the second witch and the text has not provided a clue about the activities of the other witches during this incident, leaving us uncertain about the overall activities of the other characters. The key point, however, is that the witches only respond to Peredur's attacks not to his words.

Words have a strong power in other medieval Welsh tales. In *The Fourth Branch*, Aranrhod uses her words to limit Lleu Llaw Gyffes' destiny and in *Culhwch ac Olwen*, Culhwch's step-mother uses her words to set his destiny and sends him in search of Olwen.¹²⁵ In fact, these pronouncements are quite different from the ones in *Peredur*. Aranrhod says, "I will swear a destiny that he shall not get a name until he gets one from

¹²⁴ While it is likely that the first witch that Peredur spoke to is the same witch who kills three of Arthur's men, this is not necessarily the case, for the text does not provide definite identities for these women. Indeed, this is the crux of the whole paper. How can we differentiate between some of these women?

¹²⁵ Davies, 55-58, 180.

me,” and Culhwch’s step-mother says, “I swear a destiny on you....”¹²⁶ Both of these statements are quite personal and place the power squarely with the speaker, whereas the statements made to Peredur are quite impersonal. Other statements also have a legal aspect to them, for words are sometimes the only weapon that a woman has in a setting that emphasizes masculine action.¹²⁷ In the case of Goewin from *The Fourth Branch of the Mabinogi*, her words bring both a judgment against Gwydion son of Dôn and Gilfaethwy son of Dôn, and elevate her status in Math’s court. In this sense, words have a legal component which highlights the necessity of the other part taking some type of action. This facet of statements is not limited to wronged women like Goewin, however, for Culhwch threatens “to utter three mortal shouts (the shout, known as ‘louder than the abyss,’ was a legal form of protest)” if he is not admitted immediately to Arthur’s court.¹²⁸ Furthermore, his shouts will injure the reproductive powers of all women on the island. As a warrior, Culhwch’s shouts/legal protests carry severe damage not only to Arthur’s reputation, but to countless women who will be unable to bear children, thus destroying the society of the whole island. Words then have a strong power in several of the Welsh tales, yet the witches in Peredur are slightly removed from this power since some unknown person foretold Peredur’s destiny.

There is also the fact that the witches know about Peredur’s destiny, but only as it relates to them. The witches, however, did not originate this destiny, they merely relate it to Peredur. Their words, however, are self-fulfilling and it is curious the power that the

¹²⁶ Ibid., 55, 180.

¹²⁷ Indeed, as Sjoestedt-Jonval notes, this power is quite evident in the power of the poets of Irish legends, 20, 43, 96. Irish women also have the ability to pronounce “geas” on men, like Macha wife of Crunnchu who brought about the weakness for the men of Ulster. This power of words and prophecy seems linked to women in medieval Welsh tales as well.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 80.

term “prophecy/prophesy” has in this instance. The witches seem to both be creating Peredur’s prophecy by telling it to him and are being forced to enact that prophecy against their wills since they do not prophecy it themselves. By speaking, these witches are telling Peredur what will happen and also forcing him to do it. Their words hold power over him, yet there is a question of whether they actually knew when they first met him that he will be the one to kill them. Peredur’s cousin also uses his words to convince Peredur of the situation, for “it is *foretold* that you will avenge [the death of your cousin and the injury to your uncle].”¹²⁹ Again, it is a prophecy related second-hand which convinces Peredur of his next course of actions. In addition, the first witch tells Peredur that he “would receive a horse and weapons from *me*. And you will be with *me* awhile....”¹³⁰ Even though there are nine witches, Peredur only faces one, just like in the second episode. Indeed, the text states, “he set off with *the witch* to the Witches’ Court.”¹³¹ This one witch uses her words to set in motion not only her death but the deaths of the other eight witches as well as her father and mother.

During the witch hunt craze in western Europe, both men and women were accused of witchcraft, yet women often outnumbered men by three to one.¹³² Since the author has limited the description of the witches, it is unclear whether any of the nine witches of Caer Loyw are men, except for the witches’ father. Unlike the Black Witch from *Culhwch ac Olwen*, the nine witches of Caer Loyw have two parents. Furthermore, their mother and father come with them to attack the big, handsome woman’s castle.

¹²⁹ Davies, 102, italics mine.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 79, italics mine.

¹³¹ Ibid., 79, italics mine.

¹³² In certain locations, Finland and France for example, men outnumbered women. Yet in most other areas, women comprised 75-85% of those charged with witchcraft. Robin Briggs, *Witches and Neighbors: the Social and Cultural Context of European Witchcraft* (Penguin Books: New York, 1996), 22 and Jonathan B. Durrant, *Witchcraft, Gender and Society in Early Modern Germany* (Brill: Boston, 2007), xiii.

Including the parents adds to the idea of a family, or even a war-band of *Caer Loyw* called the witches of *Caer Loyw*. It seems unlikely that an unnamed man and woman would have nine daughters and train them in arms, then join them in attacking people, but the idea of this group as an extended kin group or as an adopted family seems likely. In some way, the term “the witches of *Caer Loyw*” appears to mimic the term for Owain’s troops, “the Flight of Ravens.”¹³³ Having a father and mother also places the witches onto the same footing, so to speak, as *Peredur*. They are human, even though they do not have names, and they organize themselves in a kin group yet even more as a family. Although the Black Witch is connected to her mother, the White Witch, placing the witches of *Caer Loyw* with a father and mother makes them more human. Yet attaching them to a specific geographical location and referring to them by that place still separates them from *Peredur* and many of Arthur’s warriors.

Caer Loyw is also an interesting facet of the witches’ relationship to the story. *Caer Loyw* is an important location in *Culhwch ac Olwen* as the site of Mabon son of Modron’s prison. *Caer Loyw* is quite remote in some sense, for it is only after asking five animals for Mabon’s location that the Salmon of Llyn Llyw suggests that *Caer Loyw* might be the place. Mabon cannot attain his release from his prison in *Caer Loyw* through “gold or silver or worldly wealth,” but “through battle and fighting.”¹³⁴ In order to release Mabon,

“Arthur summoned the warriors of this Island and went to *Caer Loyw* where Mabon was in prison. Cai and Bedwyr went on the shoulders of the fish. While Arthur’s warriors were attacking the fort, Cai tore through the wall and took the prisoner on his back, and fought the men as before. Arthur came home and Mabon with him, a free man.”¹³⁵

¹³³ Davies, 138, 221, and the note on 255.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 205.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 205.

This brief passage highlights some similarities to the passage in *Peredur*. Arthur and his men are required to fight the inhabitants of Caer Loyw, yet one warrior in particular, in *Culhwch ac Olwen* it is Cai, in *Peredur* it is Peredur, leads the attack and figures more prominently in the fighting than the others.¹³⁶ Furthermore, Mabon was kidnapped from his mother when he was only three days old, yet no reason is ever given for his imprisonment. In this way, the inhabitants of Caer Loyw in *Culhwch ac Olwen* and the witches in *Peredur* do things for inexplicable reasons. Many other characters' motivations are not thoroughly explained in *Peredur*, like the Empress, but perhaps, the witches fit this idea as well.¹³⁷

There is also the number of witches of Caer Loyw. Nine is a special number in Celtic legends because it is three times three, or three triads. Indeed, the triad is important to *Peredur*, for the witch is his third trainer. He also stays with the witch for three weeks to complete his training. In Irish Literature, too, it requires nine men to restrain Culann's watch-dog and nine warriors are important in the initiation for the *fianna* and as a retinue.¹³⁸ There is, however, the idea that the number nine is a large number. Peredur's father had seven sons, so the nine witches of Caer Loyw surpass him from a numerical perspective. The same tendency to overstate numbers is seen in the description of a hero like Cu Chulainn, whose "hands have seven fingers, his feet seven toes...holding nine captured heads in one hand and ten in the other, he juggles with them...."¹³⁹ The description shows how the hero is more than a mere mortal, and the number nine

¹³⁶ Goetinck, 272 says that "Peredur is the only individual warrior mentioned in this battle."

¹³⁷ This seems especially true after Peredur has met the Empress again and she acts quite contradictory, getting angry with him for killing her deer even though he was asked to do so, for example.

¹³⁸ Sjoestedt-Jonval, 80, 101, 108.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 84.

heightens this emphasis of largeness. Moreover, many of the parents in the Welsh Arthurian tales do not have more than three children, although there are exceptions. Again, this places the witches into a category of difference since they possess a mother and a father.

The witches of *Caer Loyw* and the Black Witch share some similarities. In some ways, they are stock characters who allow the composer and the audience the freedom to imagine them in the same way as unnamed male characters. Yet these women also preserve remnants of other stories and highlight the various communities that probably co-existed during the Middle Ages. These women live outside of Arthur's influence since he must go to them, even though he is either ignorant of the women or their deeds (imprisoning Mabon, attacking the big, handsome woman's castle), yet their lives are only ended at the hands of Arthur and his knights. Without Arthur's intrusion, these women might have lived, but would have been omitted from the story. The witches serve multiple purposes, as fierce warriors who oppose Arthur and his men, as powerful entities in their own right, and as foils for the protagonists of their respective tales. They are not to be dismissed, however, for they serve an important function to the story, just as many of the men do.¹⁴⁰ Without the witches, and many of the other heroes' opponents, there would be no story and no hero.

¹⁴⁰ Winward, 78, calls the witch that Peredur kills one of the "murderous hags" since she believes that the Romances portray women from a polarized perspective, as either good or bad, with no nuances.

Abandoned Wives in *Chwedl Iarlles y Ffynawn* and *Historia Peredur vab Efrawg*

As other scholars have pointed out, the Welsh Arthurian Romances contain episodes or the theme, of abandoned wives. The knights in each case must atone for their wrongs by rededicating themselves to their respective wives. In *Chwedl Iarlles y Ffynawn* and *Historia Peredur vab Efrawg*, these women retain their titles, but remain nameless for the entirety of their tales. Each woman has a different background and a different relationship to their husbands. Indeed, the Empress of Constantinople from *Peredur* and the Iarlles from *Chwedl Iarlles y Ffynawn* both have their own lands and wealth irrespective of the knights and as a result, scholars like Goetinck have seen this as an example of the sovereignty theme where the man marries the goddess in order to claim possession of the land.¹⁴¹ This myth was transformed into the man marrying a woman who possessed the land, and in the medieval tales, she is a noblewoman. This reading, while important to show the connection to previous stories about folklore and indeed, a common store of legends and myths among Celtic and Indo-European groups, does not focus on the women themselves.¹⁴² In an age where men died in warfare, like Peredur's father, Earl Efrawg, women were abandoned and sometimes at the mercy of their husband's overlords and the depredations of other men. In some ways, this left all women, but especially women of substance, vulnerable. The reality of these desperate women is woven into the tales about knights, emphasizing the good qualities of the knights in regard to their strength and their defense of women. The knights' abandonment of their wives is also realistic, for there were times when men needed to serve their lord or simply never returned from a journey. Also, women, like the Morwyn y Gaer, were

¹⁴¹ See note 64.

¹⁴² Jackson and Woods, "The Calumniated Wife."

subject to pressure from men to marry in order for the men to obtain more land and prestige, regardless of the woman's feelings for the man.

The Empress of Constantinople in *Peredur* is fortunate for she does not feel this pressure and this freedom from financial constraints or issues allows her to look for love, indeed, "she wants only the bravest man since she has no need of wealth."¹⁴³ In fact, the Empress has sponsored a tournament to find a husband, emphasizing not only her desire for a strong man, but one who is ready and willing to face countless other knights in order to win her interest. Once Peredur has successfully defeated the other men, he sends them to the Empress' prison, providing her with more retainers and with more money since the men would need to ransom themselves. The Empress hardly needs the extra wealth, but this bold move also speaks to Peredur's bravery and fearlessness. Once all his opponents have been defeated, Peredur returns to the miller's house, forcing the Empress to send for him. Her first two messengers are unsuccessful, so "she sent one hundred knights to ask him to come and see her, and unless he came voluntarily they were to take him against his will."¹⁴⁴ Peredur, however, "fought well against them—he had them tied up as one ties a roebuck, and thrown into the mill ditch."¹⁴⁵

The Empress has learned her lesson. Rather than send a greater force against Peredur, she seeks the counsel of a wise man who convinces Peredur to come visit the Empress "for the sake of his lover."¹⁴⁶ With this approach, the Empress plays not only to her own strengths, for the audience already knows that Peredur is smitten with her, but also demonstrates her power and her wisdom. The Empress has a hundred men at her

¹⁴³ Davies, 92.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 93.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 93.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 93.

disposal, indicating that she probably has more, and also has the wisdom to grant her wise man the freedom to frame his request in whatever way he thinks is best. In this way, she shows the limits of her own wisdom, but the intelligence to leave it up to someone she can trust. In surrounding herself with good retainers, the Empress embodies a wisdom which surpasses her own.

The Empress hosts Peredur that day in her pavilion and sat down next to him even though “he sat down in the first part of the pavilion to which he came”¹⁴⁷ and they conversed. Peredur returns the next day, and as a good hostess with a good staff, “there is no part of [the pavilion] less well-appointed than the rest...Peredur sat next to the empress and talked lovingly.”¹⁴⁸ The Empress is approached by a black-haired man with a goblet who tells the Empress to give it only to the man who would fight him for it. “She looked at Peredur.”¹⁴⁹ Peredur then speaks up and asks for the goblet. Yet this one line, “she looked at Peredur,” speaks volumes about her intelligence and understanding. In another episode of *Peredur*, the Morwyn Y Gae comes to Peredur crying, prompting him to ask her what is troubling her. Here, the Empress uses non-verbal communication to force Peredur into taking a stand against a challenger. In fact, the challenger does not say with what the victor will be rewarded; he simply issues a challenge. It seems clear given the recent defeat of so many knights in the tournament that this man is another challenger, arriving too late perhaps, to take part in the tournament itself. He is another obstacle to Peredur, but he may also be the reason why the Empress was looking for the bravest man. Each challenger also gets bigger, emphasizing both the bravery that Peredur will need to face each one and the importance of the Empress to Peredur.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 93.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 93.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 93.

If, like Rhiannon and Gwawl, this man, and the next two who follow him, already had a claim on the Empress, then the Empress would need a tournament to find a champion to defeat these goblet bearing challengers. The challengers, however, may simply be another stumbling block to Peredur's claim on the Empress. There is a ritualistic tone to the goblet bearing challengers as well, for each "went down on his knee before the Empress and told her to give it only to the man who would fight him for it."¹⁵⁰ This repetition may indeed, as Goetinck has suggested, been a holdover of the sovereignty theme but it may also serve as a form of dramatic tension. Each challenger carrying a goblet provides an opportunity for the Empress to say or do something differently. Each challenger also adds to Peredur's renown and shows how important the Empress is while fulfilling the words spoken about the Peredur by his uncles and the dwarfs. The first challenger brings a goblet of gold, the next, one shaped like a wild animal's claw, the third, a crystal. Each of these is precious and rare which again emphasizes the importance of the Empress to the world through precious items, but also her value to Peredur, for he accepts each challenge easily and gives the goblet to the miller's wife.

One of the issues that the *Peredur* text presents is the reason for Peredur's abandonment of the Empress. The text does not provide one, simply a gap in the timeline and the remainder from the Black Maiden that Peredur has abandoned his wife. In fact, Goetinck notes that the influence of the continental romances, especially *Perceval*, has changed the storyline from a reprimand regarding Peredur's abandonment and the Question Test regarding the mysterious head and bleeding spear in his uncle's house.¹⁵¹

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 93.

¹⁵¹ Goetinck, 205.

In his journey, as Goetinck has shown, Peredur does not seek the answers to the spear and head, but looks for the Black Maiden and the Empress, his wife. In the Welsh tale, the composer has bound all these final elements together. In this final section of Peredur's quest, the Empress persona fades into that of Peredur's wife, as opposed to the Empress of Constantinople, a woman who can send a hundred knights to ask Peredur to come to her. Earlier, she had men who follow her, a lush and inviting tent, but by now she has been reduced to living with Peredur's uncle, another strange figure who seems to have transformed from two different uncles into one, or perhaps a third uncle only adding to the textual tension of Peredur's mission after the Black Maiden visits him.

For the Empress, Peredur embodies her idea of the bravest knight but also enjoys speaking with him. Peredur, for his part, falls in love with her beauty and perhaps also with her conversation,¹⁵² since they speak together lovingly on the second day. The Empress is a good conversationalist so far as the outcome of their discussions is concerned; yet her non-verbal communication is quite good as well. Once the first challenger comes to her, she simply looks at Peredur in order to convey what she is thinking. Her look also signifies her acceptance of Peredur not only as her champion, but also as her love interest/husband. The Empress' mind is made up since Peredur is not only the bravest man, but also a charming one. He is worthy, in her opinion, to rule beside him.

In *Chwedl Iarlles Y Ffynawn*, Owain also marries an exotic wife and then abandons her. In *Iarlles*, however, Owain's reasons for leaving his wife are realistic for he must attend Emperor Arthur at his court and simply neglects to return to his wife.

¹⁵² Manawydan seems to have a similar experience for after speaking with Rhiannon, he decides that they would suit quite well. "As a result of that conversation [between Rhiannon and Manawydan], his heart and mind grew tender toward her." Ford, 76.

Owain's journey combines other motifs and women some scholars would deem magical or supernatural, yet the iarllles herself, although unnamed, is crafted into a realistic woman with a very practical problem. The fountain and its strange properties belong to the Otherworld, and it bears an interesting comparison to Pryderi and Rhiannon's encounter, but the iarllles herself appears all too real.¹⁵³

Her land, however, seems to belong to the Otherworld. Cynon says that he went traveling to the wild laces of the earth, and found a beautiful land where a yellow-haired man directed him to the Black Knight of the Fountain, yet no one in Arthur's court has ever heard of this place.¹⁵⁴ The iarllles and her maiden, Luned, however, know of the existence of Arthur's court and the prowess of his knights.¹⁵⁵ This type of kingdom, like Arawn's, lies just next to and touching the real world. The description of the people and the food and the dining implements is fantastical and Owain notes that the bed that he slept in was fit for the Emperor himself.¹⁵⁶ While the kingdom appears as a type of Otherworld kingdom, the iarllles herself appears quite realistic and is motivated by practical concerns.

Her beauty, of course, is one of the things that attracts Owain to the countess. The first time he sees her, she is in the funeral procession for her husband, whom Owain has killed. Owain

could see a lady, her yellow hair let down over her shoulders and covered with the blood of many wounds, and she was wearing a dress of yellow brocaded silk, which was torn, and boots of speckled leather on her feet.

¹⁵³ I will be referring to the Lady of the Well, as Davies titles this chapter, as the iarllles in order to distinguish her from other countesses and ladies in the text. I also agree with Carl Lindahl that the later change in the title from *Owein* to *Iarllles y Ffynawn* in *Llyfr Coch Hergest* highlights the centrality of this episode, from a Welsh perspective, 47.

¹⁵⁴ Davies, 121. Cynon says, "Strange that it [the kingdom of the fountain] should be located in the kingdom of the emperor Arthur without anyone else coming across it."

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 127. Luned points out that "no one can defend the well but one of Arthur's retinue."

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 124.

And it was surprising that the ribs of her fingers were not worn away, so violently did she wring her hands together. Owain was certain that he had never seen such a beautiful woman, if she had been in her usual form.¹⁵⁷

Owain then asked Luned about the iarllles. She answers, “‘God knows,’ ... ‘a woman you could say is the most beautiful of women, and the most chaste, and the most generous, and the wisest and noblest.’”¹⁵⁸ Owain is convinced that he loves her the most of all women, and so Luned goes to court the iarllles on his behalf. Owain has fallen in love with a woman on sight, much like Peredur. While the Empress’s beauty and wealth is not in question, no one mentions her characteristics or positive qualities. Luned, who knows the iarllles quite well, speaks not only of her beauty, but the positive qualities that make her an impressive woman, and likely, a good mistress to her servants. The iarllles’ beauty does come first in Luned’s list, but unlike other women, Rhiannon and the Empress for example, one of her attributes is not her skillful conversation. Instead, her chastity and generosity come next, two attributes which are very important to Owain later in the tale.

The exchange between Luned and the iarllles highlights the long relationship that the two women have. Indeed, the iarllles has raised Luned and “made her wealthy.”¹⁵⁹ Luned, in return, gives the iarllles good advice, whether she likes it or not. The iarllles is grieving for her husband, and isn’t speaking to anyone when Luned approaches her. Luned upbraids the iarllles for ignoring anyone and urges her to find a new husband instead of grieving which angers the iarllles. Luned urges her to “marry someone as good as he,” and the iarllles is so angry at Luned’s proposal that she threatens to banish her after stating that she couldn’t kill Luned since she had raised her. Luned is about to leave after calling the iarllles foolish for not seeing things reasonably and threatens to not only

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 125.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 125.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 126.

break ties with the iarllles, but to never see her again. After Luned leaves the room, “the countess got up and went to the chamber door after Luned, and coughed loudly. Luned looked back; the countess beckoned to her.”¹⁶⁰ Luned returns and explains how dangerous it is if no one can defend the iarllles’ kingdom. Furthermore, the only one with enough strength to do so would be one of Arthur’s knights, so she will go and fetch one.

The relationship between the two women is one of trust and knowledge. They know each other and have certain expectations. Although Luned has an ulterior motive for recommending a new husband to the iarllles, she does so with a reasonable motive, emphasizing the safety of the kingdom over the iarllles’ own feelings. The iarllles’ grief is quite apparent in these passages: the emphasis on her wringing hands, her despondency when Luned comes to visit her, her protestations that she “could never replace [her] lord with any other man in the world,”¹⁶¹ and her bloodied and torn clothing for her husband’s funeral procession. The iarllles loved her husband very much and his death has left her bereft emotionally. In addition, she has not thought about the loss of her husband to the kingdom, but the personal loss that she has suffered. Instead, Luned must be the one to remind the iarllles of the larger picture and what her husband’s loss means to the safety and security of the kingdom, especially since the well needs to be defended in order to defend the kingdom.¹⁶² The iarllles soon realizes the importance of Luned’s words for the “kingdom can be defended only through military might and weapons.”¹⁶³ This automatically disqualifies the iarllles from the direct responsibility of defending the kingdom; it must be a man skilled in weapons. Yet marriage to the iarllles will qualify

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 126.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 126.

¹⁶² Ibid., 127.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 127 and Lindahl, 50, who notes that this is a “practical consideration,” unlike the love-centered theme in *Yvain*.

someone as the ruler of this kingdom and so the iarllles is responsible, indirectly, for the defense of the kingdom. She must choose a brave and strong knight to defend the kingdom, regardless of her own desires.

Indeed, Luned supposedly sets off for Arthur's kingdom to search for a lord, but instead waits the requisite time for her journey, returns to the iarllles and pronounces success, then brings Owain, as the iarllles requested, the next day. In this passage, the women speak to each other, but neither apparently speaks to Owain. Luned brings him to the iarllles, who "looked carefully at Owain,"¹⁶⁴ and comments to Luned that he doesn't look like he has been travelling. She then realizes that "this is none other than the man who took away my lord's life."¹⁶⁵ Luned responds practically that Owain is therefore stronger than her husband and the iarllles dismisses them and then convenes a council of her whole kingdom to discuss the situation. The gathered crowd is offered a choice, either one of them must marry the iarllles or allow her to seek a husband from outside the kingdom. The people agree that she must find a husband from outside the kingdom and so she marries Owain, after "she brought bishops and archbishops to her court to perform the marriage."¹⁶⁶ Owain enriches the kingdom with ransom from the knights who come to the well and stayed for three years.

The iarllles of the well is likely based on a story about sovereignty and/or the story of a fairy bride.¹⁶⁷ Certainly her kingdom is different from the exotic idea of Constantinople in *Peredur* while it still retains a sense of being apart from the real world,

¹⁶⁴ Davies, 127.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 127.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 128.

¹⁶⁷ Juliette Woods, "The Fairy Bride Legend in Wales," in *Folklore* 103 (1992): 59, seems to help support this reading. She connects the incidents in Walter Map's *De Nugis Curialium* to the Anglo-Norman presence in Wales. There is an interesting twist in the stories in *Peredur* and *Iarllles* since it is the husbands who abandon their wives, the opposite of the usual Fairy Bride tale. This might indicate a type of counter-colonial narrative that Aronstein sees in the two major versions of *Peredur*.

embodied in the idea of Arthur's realm. The practical nature of the story, however, emphasizes the real issues that people faced. The iarllles needed someone to defend her kingdom just as the Empress was looking for the bravest knight. Both women were responsible for their respective kingdoms, the iarllles for military reasons, the Empress for all things within her kingdom. As explained in the *Distressed Ladies* chapter, women often relied upon male knights to safeguard themselves and their dependents from the depredations of neighboring knights and noblemen in the Welsh Arthurian tales. Owain, like Peredur, defends these women, restores their lands, and gains recompense for them; otherwise, these women would be prey to misuse at the hands of their attackers.¹⁶⁸

Indeed, after Owain has abandoned the iarllles for three years at Arthur's court, he travels the wilderness and becomes covered in hair, avoiding men, but staying with wild animals. The countess who lives nearby must restore him to his humanity for he had become too weak to move and, in return, he saves the countess from a neighboring earl bent on seizing all of the countess's lands and destroying her. Owain is still weak after his three-month recuperation; nevertheless he grabs the earl and rides with him back to the countess's castle. In response to Owain's victory, the countess offers him everything "to be his domain."¹⁶⁹ The countess in this passage resembles the iarllles y Ffynawn, since neither one speaks directly to Owain but to another woman instead, the countess to one of her maidens who waits upon Owain and gives him the ointment which begins to heal him, and the iarllles to Luned who not only assists the iarllles but also maintains Owain's reputation against his detractors. The countess under siege has little to do with

¹⁶⁸ The Morwyn y Gaer, for example, tells Peredur that the earl attacking her will give her to his stable hands for their pleasure, Davies, 76.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 133.

Owain until he has brought the attacking earl to her as payment for the ointment used to restore him.

Like the *Iarlles y Ffynawn*, the countess under siege is quite practical. She gives one of her maidens the ointment to heal Owain, as well as clothes and a horse. She also instructs the maiden to wait for Owain, and then once he has come to the countess's castle, she instructs the maiden to care for Owain and show him hospitality. Her ointment has some type of healing power, for it not only restores Owain to his human self, it also works to make the long hair all over Owain's body drop off periodically. Owain's "flesh was then whiter than before,"¹⁷⁰ showing that he has not only returned to his human self with the help of the countess, but that he has also been made more pure or clean than before.¹⁷¹ Yet even this magical ointment has a practical side to it, since the countess is unhappy with the maiden for using it all on Owain. "It was unfortunate that I spent one hundred and forty pounds worth of precious ointment on a man without knowing who he is,"¹⁷² she says, altering the audience's perception of the ointment slightly. It is no longer quite so mysterious so much as it is quite costly, yet its ability to restore some strength to Owain and to then slowly slough off his body hair reinforces its extraordinary nature. The countess is practical too, when she offers all her restored lands to Owain since he has proven that even in his weakened state he is a match for the attacking earl. Owain's refusal of the countess under siege is not surprising; as Goetinck pointed out, Peredur could not marry many of those other ladies whom he rescued since he was either destined for the Empress, or after their separation, he was still married.¹⁷³ Indeed, Lindahl has seen

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 132.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 132.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 132.

¹⁷³ Goetinck, 205, 242.

Owain's refusal as indicative of Welsh cultural values, whereas *Yvain*'s "eligible widows and aristocratic maidens waiting at the end of every adventure...constitutes the ideal fantasy for a bachelor French knight."¹⁷⁴ As hospitable and courteous as the countess appears, Owain refuses her offer since he is already married and has been rebuked for abandoning his wife.

Owain's chastity is important for it reinforces the iarllles' chastity as well. Luned lists chastity as the iarllles' next great quality and it is her chastity, and Owain's, which allows them to reunite later in the tale. The iarllles's chastity must be constrained by marriage, which is probably why neither she nor the countess under siege speaks directly to Owain. Holding Owain at a slight distance from the women also emphasizes the difficulties that women faced in dealing with men when they were unmarried. The iarllles seeks the assistance of her people in order to determine whether she should marry Owain and the countess under siege waits until Owain has proven himself helpful against her attacker before she considers him as a man worthy of her kingdom and herself. In both cases, the women consider Owain from a physical perspective, not from an emotional one. As such, both of these women maintain their emotional distance from Owain and preserve their chastity at the same time.

The power of words plays a crucial part for both abandoned wives, the iarllles and the Empress. Both women seek advice or counsel in regards to the knights; the Empress asks a wise man for help in inviting Peredur to her pavilion and the iarllles asks the whole kingdom regarding her next marriage, even offering herself to anyone in her own kingdom. These women both seek counsel to determine the course of their lives, but they

¹⁷⁴ Lindahl, 49. He also notes that in *Yvain*, Cynon's French counterpart enjoys a tryst with a maiden, but Cynon meets twenty-four beautiful women who wait on him in a public setting, 50.

also display wisdom in regards to the course their kingdoms and their lives should take. The iarlles does not speak directly to Owain, at least not that the text says, whereas the Empress confirms for herself that Peredur will suit her, even if he is a bit naïve.¹⁷⁵ For the iarlles, Owain suits her because of his physical prowess, not because of himself. Her practical acceptance of Owain as her next husband hints that she has no interest in truly replacing her dead husband, whom she loved very much. Instead, she deals with the issue at hand after balking temporarily at marrying the man who killed her husband. The iarlles also takes ownership of this decision by bringing in her people to help advise her. Yet, her manifest interest is in her land and that is how she frames her request to her people, rather than stating that she is interested in a new husband or even that she has a candidate in mind. Just as Luned surprised her with Owain as a replacement husband, the iarlles also surprises the people with Owain.

Just as Peredur and the Empress are reunited, Owain is reunited with the iarlles after he frees Luned. Owain and Luned “went to the kingdom of the Lady of the Well, and when he left there he took the countess with him to Arthur’s court, and she was his wife as long as she lived.”¹⁷⁶ In both *Peredur* and *Iarlles*, the knight is reunited with his female assistant before he resumes his life with his wife, highlighting the women’s forgiveness and their generosity.¹⁷⁷ The assistant pushes the knight into a life of marriage and stability and then acts as support, either providing information or a push to the knight to resume his knightly life and find his wife.¹⁷⁸ Once this support or impetus is

¹⁷⁵ Peredur sits anywhere in the tent because he does not realize that the tent is similar to a castle or house.

¹⁷⁶ Davies, 136-7.

¹⁷⁷ Of course, the Black Maiden turns out to be a male cousin of Peredur’s, but he saw her as a woman during previous episodes.

¹⁷⁸ Goetinck rightly argues that there has been a shift in *Peredur* from the Black Maiden pushing Peredur to find his wife to Peredur solving the riddle of his uncle’s castle, 205, 257. As Goetinck points out Peredur

unnecessary, the assistant fades out of the story. Each wife, too, fades into the background, away from her previous identity. The iarllles was tied to her land in order to make sure that it was defended, but in order to explain her movement to Arthur's court, she has been reduced to the term "wife" rather than her title. In the iarllles's case, too, her death is important to the story, even if it is only alluded to, since Owain belongs to a northern tradition linked to the real Owein ab Urien of Rheged.¹⁷⁹ The iarllles has served her purpose in the story, to provide an adventure at which Owain must succeed, to act as a reward for his strength and loyalty to the maiden Luned, and to prove his strength of arms as an example of knighthood and as a warrior. Furthermore, Owain's return to his own lands, in Lindahl's opinion, highlights the Welsh influence in this version.¹⁸⁰ Instead of Owain living on with his wife in a foreign land, he "unceremoniously detached [her] from her land and relocated to Arthur's,"¹⁸¹ to the real world, and after killing the Black Oppressor, he returns to his own lands and his own people, the people of Owein ap Urien. The iarllles, however, still serves as an example of the difficulties that women faced both for themselves and their dependents, and also as an example of how practical women needed to be in order to maintain their kingdoms. Welsh women rarely had charge of land themselves or inherited it,¹⁸² yet for those few who did, how difficult must it have been to maintain in the face of male relatives? In this way, the iarllles and the Empress are examples of exotic or alien women and also examples of real women.

goes "searching for news about the black-haired maiden," Davies, 97, not for news of the spear or his second uncle's castle.

¹⁷⁹ Goetinck, 23, 30, Lindahl, 44, among others.

¹⁸⁰ Lindahl, 51.

¹⁸¹ Helen Fulton "Individual and Society in *Owein/Yvain* and *Gereint/Erec*" in *Celtic Studies Association of North America Yearbook* 1, (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2001), 25.

¹⁸² Lindahl, 52.

Conclusion

This work has been a conversation at times, between myself and the reader and, hopefully, the reader and the original texts, providing a new perspective on characters that are sometimes passed over. I have tried to invigorate characters that I feel have been overlooked simply because they have remained nameless and seem not to actively participate in the stories. For me, a good story is about characterization and plot working together and I feel that these characters contribute to their respective stories in both those categories. Although we can never know who composed or authored these stories, these unnamed women can help us understand the world that those author(s) and readers inhabited. Literature is a reflection of the culture which creates it. The Medieval Welsh Literature which has permeated Wales in the modern era and contributed in some way to all medieval literature through the various Arthurian Romances still resonates with audiences today. The Medieval Welsh Literature collectively known as *The Mabinogion* were not popular in the Middle Ages,¹⁸³ but the common folklore elements in these stories and the interjection of reality into these stories tells us more about the people who lived during the Middle Ages in Wales. Furthermore, the vast amount of research done on comparing Medieval Welsh stories to other Celtic stories, especially the corpus of Irish Literature, shows all scholars, literary, historical, anthropological, and linguistic, more about the transmission of common themes, story types, and language; we would be much poorer without these stories.

Recovering nameless and silent women has occupied scholars in other disciplines as well. Among Arthurian scholars, Jane Bliss has examined the revelation of names, the

¹⁸³ Rachel Bromwich, "The 'Mabinogion' and Lady Charlotte Guest (1812-1895)" in *On Arthurian Women: Essays in Memory of Maureen Fries*, edited by Bonnie Wheeler and Fiona Tolhurst (Dallas: Scriptorium Press, 2001), 321-322.

delay of names and the synchronizing of names and titles. Among biblical scholars, the work *Women in Scripture: A Dictionary of Named and Unnamed Women in the Hebrew Bible, the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books and the New Testament* covers every woman mentioned in those works. This work has nearly 50 more pages on unnamed women in the Hebrew Bible than on named women and each entry on a named woman generally takes more space than the unnamed women. The more spiritual book *Remember Lot's Wife And Other Unnamed Women of the Bible* by April Yamasaki reclaims those women caught up in the dichotomy between good and bad women. Yamasaki conjectures quite a bit about Lot's wife, yet her contextualization of a woman often scorned brings new life to a character and reminds us to read against the grain. Furthermore, these works highlight a similar relationship between these texts and unnamed women, whereas Bliss' work focuses much more on women who have names but whose names are obscured for part or much of her texts. Even now, more scholarship across multiple literatures will help to focus on these women to fill in gaps in our understanding of women and the roles they played in society.

This brief attempt to bring to life some characters who have been ignored and overlooked is simply the starting point for a much larger series of questions. Why do some characters seem insignificant? In Medieval Welsh literature, why are so many male and female characters unnamed? What does this tell us about how people tell stories and how they understand human relationships? Certainly, it would be too time consuming for every character in Medieval Welsh Literature to be named, but that tells us something about the intent of the author(s), the audience who either heard or read these works, and the original stories as well. I hope I have shown that the author(s) and the audience could

use stock characters as place keepers, in a way, and that many of these unnamed or titled women were meant to convey fantastic places without always overtly referencing the Celtic Otherworld. These characters help us to understand our major characters better and for that alone they should be studied. Indeed, without disloyal or loyal wives, serving women, and damsels in distress, our male protagonists would have nothing to do but fight each other and no real way to have children. Many of these women highlight the necessity of creating a community with both men and women and the importance of women to men, even if practical concerns triumph over emotional ones in many of the Welsh texts.

There is more to do to recover these women as characters and as creations of their author(s). It is my greatest hope that comparative studies of unnamed characters in a variety of literary sources will highlight how important minor characters enhance our understanding of human nature and literature. We have all experienced brief assistance in our own lives, I believe. A small suggestion from someone at the market, a helpful hint from a neighbor, or guidance from a counselor all help to make our lives smoother. I feel that literature is a small reflection of our own lives and that the human relationships shine brightest in truly great literature. While many of these women were crafted to fulfill plot points, the way that they interact with the named characters in Medieval Welsh Literature exemplifies these important facets of human relationships.

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